

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE YELLOW PAINTING





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
YELLOW PAINTING**

Aunt Mathilda is angry! How dare Uncle Titus hang a gruesome painting in their living room! That same night someone tries to steal the painting. This is reason enough for Jupiter, Pete and Bob to get involved. Threatening calls and nightly raids lead the three to a suspicious company that deals in safes and vaults. Then their investigations take them across the sea to a lonely house on a bay. A surprise awaits them there.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Yellow Painting

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## 1. Aunt Mathilda's Wrath

Jupiter Jones had never seen his Aunt Mathilda like this before. She stood in the middle of the living room and pointed accusingly to the wall above the sofa. What hung there aroused her anger. It was a very large painting with a deteriorating frame from which the false gold leaf was peeling off. The painting shows a clearing with grazing cattle and a stream.

"What the devil has gotten into you," exclaimed Aunt Mathilda, "to hang this monstrosity in my living room?" Titus Jones sat unhappily in his armchair, threatening to grow smaller with each new outburst of his wife's anger. The tips of his beautiful black moustache trembled. He had pressed his knees together, his hands folded, occasionally trying in vain to put in a word.

But Aunt Mathilda wouldn't let that happen.

Carefully Jupe looked around the corner of the anteroom. He thought it was better not to show himself. His uncle and aunt have had a largely harmonious marriage for the past three decades. Anyway, Jupiter had never experienced an open quarrel between the two. And now he wanted to spare them the experience that their nephew had accidentally witnessed such a clash.

"I'm really amazed at you purchasing such worthless and useless stuff that no one wants to have anything to do with," cried Aunt Mathilda. She had now planted herself directly in front of Uncle Titus and put her arms into her hips.

That's unfair, Jupe thought. After all, Uncle Titus was a successful businessman who bought used items such as lamps, furniture, crockery and all sorts of useful and useless things. He then refurbished them, where possible, for sale to his customers. He had started out as an ordinary junk dealer, but he had long since outgrown it, and they did not live badly from the business he ran with passion. At the end of the old salvage yard, there was a storeroom where Uncle Titus kept special and selected treasures until he found suitable buyers.

"And that you now take advantage of my absence to make my living room so horrible—" Aunt Mathilda struggled for the right word to express her aversion, but she found none. "That's the limit!"

"I just thought—" Uncle Titus began.

Aunt Mathilda was not curious to know what Uncle Titus was thinking. She had come up with the right expression. "I'll give you five minutes for this eyesore to disappear from my living room."

Jupiter thought the moment had come to intervene. He owed Uncle Titus a lot and couldn't let him down now. He tiptoed to the front door.

He opened the door quietly and slammed it shut. Then he began to whistle and strolled through the anteroom into the living room with his hands in his pockets.

"Hello, Aunt Mathilda," the First Investigator shouted cheerfully. "How are you, Uncle Titus?" Jupiter noticed his uncle breathed a sigh of relief.

Aunt Mathilda was startled. Then she smiled, slightly pinched.

"You've come at the right moment," she said. "Your uncle and I have a little disagreement about the artistic value of this painting here." She pointed again to the picture

above the sofa.

Jupiter pretended to see it for the first time and stepped closer.

It was striking how consistently the painter had reached into the yellow paint pot. Even the stream and the cattle were slightly yellowish. A strange work of art, Jupiter thought.

Actually, he could understand Aunt Mathilda very well. How could Uncle Titus have gotten such a hideous item!

"I bought it at an auction," Uncle Titus said into the silence. "Extremely inexpensive, for \$170 at an auction in Santa Paula."

Not much money, Jupiter thought. But at the same time he felt sorry for Uncle Titus. From the corner of his eye he looked at the two, who looked past each other inexorably.

Next to the sofa were many small pictures that were hanging on the wall yesterday. Uncle Titus must have taken them off to make way for the hideous painting. They weren't pretty either, Jupe thought, but they were Aunt Mathilda's watercolours. However, he didn't say anything to avoid drawing his aunt's wrath upon him.

"I wanted to make your aunt happy. It's something else." He straightened up a little in his armchair.

Jupiter felt his hopeful look.

"Something else?" hissed Aunt Mathilda. "So my watercolours aren't good enough for you anymore. And besides, what does 'something else' mean? So one fine day there'll be a toilet lid hanging on my living room wall, huh?"

Uncle Titus looked at his wife in horror. Jupe struggled to grin.

"Would you not become so agitated?" Uncle Titus said gracefully.

"Come on!" With a wave of her hand, Aunt Mathilda shooed away the annoying objection. "You have three minutes left."

She nodded to her husband and left.

"All right. The wiser one gives in," Uncle Titus groaned and lifted himself from his armchair. "Will you help me?"

"Of course," Jupiter said and winked at his uncle with encouragement. Together, they pushed the sofa off the wall. Then Titus stretched up to the picture and gently lifted it down. They wrapped it in an old blanket and carried it across the salvage yard to the storeroom.

"That's not what I know of Aunt Mathilda," began Jupiter cautiously.

"So, thank goodness she's rarely like that," Uncle Titus sighed, "but she'll calm down again." He unlocked the door to the storeroom and turned on the light. In the pale glow of the ceiling lamp, they looked at the painting. Jupiter found it even more bleak now than when it was over at the living room.

"Don't you like it?" Uncle Titus asked quietly.

"Well, if I'm gonna be honest—" Jupiter started.

"Of course you should!"

"Well, it's not exactly my style..."

"... but it would have been something else," Uncle Titus completed the sentence. "Too bad." He shrugged his shoulders and shoved Jupiter out of the storeroom.

"Are you going to put the watercolours back on?" Jupiter asked.

"Let's see," Uncle Titus grumbled. He locked the door of the storeroom with an annoying clang of keys and stomped away.

Thoughtfully, Jupiter went over to the trailer where The Three Investigators called their Headquarters—one equipped with a lab, phone and all the other things you need in a detective's office. His stomach growled loudly, and so he rummaged in the cupboard for the



emergency food ration. Two half bars of chocolate appeared, along with two chewing gum packets and a can of bean stew.

Less than half an hour later, he sat at the table and spooned the stew into his mouth. He wanted to talk to someone, but Bob and Pete were on a two-day physical education course, and Lys just didn't answer the phone. Jupiter turned on the radio. Donovan sang his song about the Universal Soldier.

Jupiter wondered if Aunt Mathilda's wrath had gone. He decided not to answer this question until the next morning at breakfast.

He brushed his teeth with mineral water, rolled out his sleeping bag and turned off the radio. Through the window of the trailer was the moon, full and silvery bright. It was just like a lantern at a children's party, Jupiter thought before he fell asleep. At full moon, Jupiter Jones always had confusing dreams. He also rolled around a lot. When he woke up, he could hardly remember his dream. With his arms crossed, he laid there staring at the ceiling.

Suddenly, he startled up. He wasn't dreaming the sound coming from outside. He glanced at his watch. It was just after two. Yawning, Jupiter rubbed his eyes. He looked through the window of the trailer. The moon had bathed the whole area in milky white light, like floodlights in a stadium. The salvage yard, the wooden fence, the storeroom at the end—everything was as usual—quiet and peaceful.

Jupiter ran both hands over his face, pinched his eyes together, and nearly missed two dark figures who were tampering with something in the semi-shade at the storeroom door. At the moment when he wanted to turn away yawning, one of the figures raised his arm, and that didn't escape Jupiter.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Jupiter shouted in a low voice. He turned around to get to the door. However, he didn't get far though. Still dazed by his confused dreams, he staggered a little at the second step and swept the pot with the bean remains from the stove as he tried to hold on to something.

He fell to the ground, clattering.

"What a bummer!" cursed Jupiter. Involuntarily, he bent down to pick up the pot and stepped onto bean remains that had spilled onto the floor. He flinched, suddenly became very clear in his head to let the pot be. When he came up again, the two figures had disappeared—as if they were swallowed up by the earth.

"What an idiot!" Jupiter stood there, trying to concentrate, until he remembered he could do it lying down.

## 2. Pythagoras is Always Right

Soon there was going to be a fight in which Jupiter was unwillingly involved—and in self-defence he reached for one of the branches. He has seen it done many times in movies—the hero grabs hold of some obscure thing, uses his magical powers to miraculously transform it into some weapon to fend against blood-thirsty opponents.

Of course nothing happened. No blow succeeded, no shot was fired. Instead, the three or four masked figures came closer and closer to Jupiter and snapped at his face with hands that looked like tongs.

“Hey, wake up!” Pete bent over his friend and pinched him in the cheek. He knew Jupiter couldn’t stand that. Jupiter startled and was wide awake immediately. He brushed Pete’s hand aside.

“That was close again,” he muttered.

“One of your full moon dreams, huh?”

“Hmm.”

With his thumb, Pete pointed to the traces of the nocturnal events that still graced the ground.

“You threw bean stew around in your sleep?”

“Instead of waking me,” Jupe said, “you should have cleaned it up.” His eyes now fell on Bob, who was sitting at the table, building a frightening pyramid from school books.

“What is he doing?” Jupiter asked Pete, turned and let himself sink back, groaning.

“Three guesses,” Bob said in between. “We have a lot of good intentions for today. I’m just saying—Pythagoras.”

Ten minutes later The Three Investigators brooded together over the preparation for a class test in geometry. It was the last test of the school year. Pete and Bob had been dreading it for weeks, but Jupiter was really looking forward to it. As in all other subjects, he was also brilliant in mathematics.

“Seems weird to me.” With a few strokes Bob drew a rather oblique right-angled triangle onto the paper.

“What’s wrong with that?” Jupe took the pencil from Bob, grabbed a ruler and drew the squares on the three sides as accurately as one could wish for. “That two squares up there should not be larger than the square down here. That’s the way it is. This old Greek is always right. If you find a single right-angled triangle where it’s different, the Nobel Prize is for sure.”

“It’s simple,” Pete interfered. “You draw a new triangle, not as skewed as that one, and the squares too. Then you cut the two squares into small strips and see if they all fit exactly into the hypotenuse square.”

“Even so,” Bob wouldn’t give up so soon, “is it proof that it always has to be that way?”

Suddenly, Uncle Titus had stuck his head through the window of the trailer. “If you’re looking for a problem, I’ve got one,” he said. He tried his best to sound happy, but Jupiter immediately realized that his uncle was anything but in a good mood.

“Come on, I’ll show you.” Curiously they climbed out of the trailer and followed Uncle Titus, who stomped across the salvage yard to the storeroom. “There, look at that.” He

pointed almost reproachfully at the door.

Scratch marks were visible at first sight.

Still fuming, Jupiter remembered the two nocturnal visitors he had scared away. "Aha," he said as coolly as possible.

"This is proof," Uncle Titus declared almost solemnly, "that last night someone tried to break into the storeroom." He looked at the three in turn. "I suppose I can assume it wasn't one of you."

"Word of honour." Jupiter lifted two spread fingers. "If we wanted to get in, all we have to do is come to you."

"Exactly," Uncle Titus confirmed. "And I know for a fact that those scratches weren't there yesterday."

Jupiter thought it was better to keep the nightly events to himself until he was alone with Bob and Pete.

"We have plenty of assignments," he said, "but of course, cases in the family take precedence."

Uncle Titus looked at the three from top to bottom. He was really in a bad mood. Somehow the quarrel with Aunt Mathilda seemed to continue. Jupiter had hoped that the situation would have relaxed.

"All right," Uncle Titus growled. "Then the three great detectives can show what they can really do." He paused and seemed a little embarrassed about the subject. "If I remember correctly, you work for free! And you won't make an exception for Uncle Titus, would you?"

In fact, The Three Investigators never took money from their clients. They were proud of that. They wouldn't have thought of asking Jupiter's uncle to pay.

"It's our honour," Pete said with a slight bow. The other two nodded.

"And what are you going to do now?" asked Uncle Titus.

"Frankly," Jupiter said, "I think we're starving." Luckily, Aunt Mathilda came by at that moment and invited all three of them for lunch.

"We have something to talk about and we'll be there in fifteen minutes," Jupiter said. When they were alone, he told the other two about the events of the past night.

"Surely they wanted to go to the storeroom," said the Second Investigator, without going any further into Jupiter's mishap. Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief and was glad that his friends didn't make fun of him.

A few minutes later, four of them sat around the dining table. Uncle Titus solemnly spread a napkin on his lap, and Aunt Mathilda brought in a steaming saucepan.

"Here's one of Juve's favourite dishes," she announced.

"Not bean stew?" cried Jupiter.

"Oh yes, I wanted to please you."

"Did you succeed?" laughed Pete as he held out his plate.

After a critical look at his T-shirt, Jupiter treated himself to a plate. He loved to eat passionately, but had lost four kilos in the last few months due to strict discipline and a sensible diet and so he could afford to eat more again.

"Is there anything valuable in the storeroom?" Bob asked Uncle Titus.

Titus made a helpless gesture. "No. I've been thinking all morning about what those guys could have been looking for in the storeroom. There's nothing particularly valuable in it at the moment."

"Only now?" Aunt Mathilda asked, but Uncle Titus ignored that.

"Was there a customer who was particularly eager for a something unique?" Bob wanted to know. Uncle Titus shook his head again.

“Probably the best thing would be to go to the storeroom afterwards and take a look at the inventory,” Bob suggested.

Pete agreed. If it were up to him, Pythagoras should disappear, at least, for this afternoon.

“Hey, slow down. We started with geometry and got a new case,” Jupiter said. “That’s okay, but it’s no reason to stop geometry again.”

He had to play the spoilsport again. “What do you say, Uncle Titus?”

This guy is so clever, Pete thought. He’s got us all wrapped around his little finger.

“Totally right,” Uncle Titus inevitably agreed, without realising that it was now him keeping the boys away from urgently needed school work.

“To make up for it, we’ll lie in wait tonight. This means that one of us will be on watch for a few hours at a time,” Jupiter promised.

That troubled Bob. Jupiter often made promises without having spoken to them. He just couldn’t get over bossing them around. Bob thought that now was the right time for a little retaliation. “And if someone comes again tonight,” he said slowly, “then we will definitely not let him get away this time.”

He spoke, got up and went out. The others looked after him in astonishment, especially Aunt Mathilda.

“What’s the matter with him?” She did not see that her nephew had turned quite red for the second time that morning.

“I don’t know,” Jupiter replied hypocritically.

### 3. The Camel-Hair Man Appears

With Pythagoras, the afternoon and evening flew by. At some point, the girls, Lys, Kelly and Elizabeth, showed up and left when they realized that The Three Investigators were doing nothing on geometry. It had been a warm day, sweltering at dusk. Jupiter suggested camping outside in front of the trailer. Pete was the first to guard. Around two o'clock, Jupiter woke up on time for his shift and found Pete asleep. He nodded off several times, and Bob did not feel much better. When they went to school the next morning, they had had quite a lot of sleep and no encounters with unauthorized intruders.

In the afternoon, Jupiter was once again occupied with Pythagoras—this time with more concentration than the day before. And if he had not stood up to straighten and stretch, he probably wouldn't have noticed a man there.

The man seemed very strange to Juve at first. He got out of an ancient Buick, which was polished to a high gloss and lovingly cared for. Despite the warm weather, the man wore a camel-hair coat, which looked quite expensive. On a normal-sized body sat a much too massive bald skull. And when the man finally stood in front of him, Jupiter saw on his little finger a ring that could have come from a junk yard of one of the traders Uncle Titus dealt with. He wondered what movie he'd seen a guy like that before, but he couldn't recall.

"You're Mr Jones?" The man asked.

"That's right," Jupiter said. With the man's strange look, he thought, he'd play a little game with him.

"There's supposed to be a picture here, I mean, a painting." The strange man had an extremely pleasant, soft voice. "I want to buy it."

"Is it a very large landscape painting featuring grazing cattle and a stream?" Juve asked.

"Exactly." The man seemed to speak only what was necessary. But that didn't feel quite right as his pleasant voice sounded completely indifferent, Jupiter thought. Why did he want to buy a painting like that?

"I'm sorry, sir. To buy that painting, you'll have to talk to my aunt, Mathilda Jones. However, she is in Los Angeles today and won't be back until tomorrow evening."

The man did not make a face. "Then I'll come back the day after tomorrow," he said, turning on his heel. "Could you keep that painting for me until then?"

"Sure!" replied Jupiter.

"Thank you," the man said as he walked to his car. He turned his car around in a big loop and left.

Bob and Pete emerged from the dust cloud left behind by the stranger on their bicycles.

"Well," Bob said and leaned his bike against the wall of the trailer. "Just made another big sale?"

"Not yet. But maybe the day after tomorrow. That guy wants to buy the Rembrandt standing over there in the storeroom. Aunt Mathilda didn't like it at all, so Uncle Titus had to put it in the storeroom. And this man in the Buick may lay two thousand dollars on the table for it the day after tomorrow. Or ten thousand."

"Perfect," grinned Pete.

"Or even fifty," Bob said.

“Anyway, this was the weirdest fellow I’ve come across in a long time.” He looked in the direction in which the camel-hair man had disappeared. “I bet there’s something fishy going on! Let’s go take a look at the painting.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other. Juve walked over to the house, fished the key from the board and met the other two at the storeroom door.

From the dusky semi-darkness of the storeroom, the yellowed gold frame glowed. “Do you really think he means this painting?” Bob stared at the unusual composition in yellow. He had no idea to works of this kind. Art had to be modern if it were to please him—as modern as the musicians he worked with as an employee of Sax Sendler’s music agency. With him, the Beatles already fell under classical music. And all painters before Picasso were bland predecessors of photography.

“Absolutely. I described it to him,” Jupiter said. Then he related in a few sentences about the quarrel this so-called work of art had caused between Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus.

“And you think this man will pay you money for it?” Bob was still standing amazed in front of the yellow monstrosity.

“Well, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure,” Pete mocked.

“Let’s take it outside for another look,” Jupiter said. In one corner of the storeroom he found the remains of a brocade curtain. He carried the fabric outside and spread it on the ground. Bob and Pete lifted the painting up and carefully placed it on the fabric.

In the bright sunlight, The Three Investigators could now see the work of art properly. Like so many before and after him, the painter had chosen a clearing in an autumn forest as his motif. Everything was yellow, but of course, in different shades. Even the tree trunks were paler than Bob have ever found and photographed in the forest. They went down on their knees and looked at the work of art in detail from all sides.

Juve gently moved his index finger over the colours. “Not bad at all in terms of craftsmanship.”

“Still, there’s no reason to waste even fifty dollars on it,” Pete said.

“And certainly not to break in here at night because of it.” Bob tapped his forehead.

“This could be interesting.” Jupiter had bent over the edge of the painting till his nose almost touched the canvas. “Perhaps we should disassemble this futuristic work of art,” Jupiter suggested. “Maybe we’ll find something on the back of the canvas.”

Bob waved. “What’s the point? It takes a lot of time if we have to put it back together afterwards. Is this worth doing on just a suspicion that there is something in it?”

“We now know that someone is interested in it,” Jupiter interjected.

“There may even be three of them,” Pete reminded us of the two nightly visitors that Jupiter chased away.

“Nothing but speculations,” Bob growled. “How long have we been working on this basis?”

Pete looked at him mockingly. “There are exactly two ways why you don’t feel like it. One is theoretical and it is called Pythagoras. And the second is practical and it is called Elizabeth.”

Bob was furious. But when he saw Pete’s grin, he had to laugh and gave himself up.

Fifteen minutes later, they had carefully spread out all the components on the brocade: the canvas, the wood on which it had been stretched, the adhesive film used to protect everything on the back, and the empty frame.

They did not need to be art experts to realize that this canvas had already been used for another purpose before the painter decorated it with the autumn forest scene. At the edges of

the canvas, which had been covered by the shabby gold frame, there was a strange combination of signs, numbers, lines and letters, painted in black and red ink.

“All right,” Bob said, burying his hands in his pockets and shrugging his shoulders. “Below are some strange characters. On top of it is the so-called art. So what?”

“We have an assignment from Uncle Titus,” said Jupe.

And before Bob could open his mouth to say that it was mere speculation to make a connection between the nocturnal visitors and the yellow painting, Jupe added: “Something stinks here. I can smell it.”

They carried the canvas to the furthest corner of the storeroom, where it was darkest. Pete fetched a sun lamp from the laboratory in the trailer and held it behind the canvas. The continuation of the series of lines, signs, numbers and letters became visible.

“As I know you well,” Bob growled, “should I make a copy of it now, because I’m responsible for such things?” He waited in vain for a contradiction. Grumpily, he set to work and drew everything on two sheets of paper as best he could.

“If you can figure out anything... congratulations,” he grumbled when he was done. “I certainly can’t. I’ll leave it to you to put that thing back together. See you tomorrow.”

The two watched him in amazement as he got on his bike and cycled off.

## 4. Easy Come, Easy Go

That night Jupiter and Pete had no choice but to struggle to stay awake. Around three-thirty, Jupe had started counting the stars in the wheelbarrow of the Big Dipper. When he reached twenty, he heard a scratching noise. He straightened up and stared over to the storeroom. There was nothing. As in the nights before, the moon stood silvery-bright over the Pacific coast.

At some point, Jupe fought in vain against sleep.

Suddenly, the next thing he noticed was Pete sprinting across the salvage yard. He ran past the storeroom and threw himself into a spot where a black shadow hung from the man-high fence around the compound. Jupe saw Pete embrace the shadow from behind. The shadow became shorter and eventually disappeared completely behind the athletic figure of the Second Investigator.

Jupiter picked up the flashlight he had lying next to him and ran to meet Pete. Using his left hand, he dragged a figure that struggled and fought back with all his might, repeatedly kicking Pete's shin without hitting the target.

It was a boy of about 18 years old with a slender figure, red hair and lots of freckles. "Let go of me! You're hurting me!" he hissed at Pete.

"You look familiar," Jupiter said and shone the light in his face.

The boy hissed and kicked again. This time he hit his target fully.

"Hey!" Pete yelled. With his right hand, he gave the boy a punch that was so painful that he stopped wriggling.

"Get him in the trailer!" Jupe ordered. "We can talk better there."

They pushed the boy up into the trailer, sat him onto a chair, and locked the door as a precaution. They then leaned against the wall with their arms crossed, as detectives often do in movies.

"Let's have it out," said Pete. Although he was wide awake, but he actually wanted to sleep a few more hours until morning. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't you know him?" Jupiter asked. "In high school, he used to be a class above us." He turned to the boy who was seated quite poorly on the chair, constantly looking down. His jeans had a long tear from the jousting. Jupiter thought hard, pinching his lip. "Your name is Alex Hamilton. Your father has a drug store at the harbour."

"So what?" snapped the boy. "What business is it of yours?"

Now Pete went to the front of the boy and looked at him closely. "Sure, that's Alex Hamilton."

"If you don't tell us what you were doing here," said Jupiter coolly, "we have no choice but to go to the police."

Alex Hamilton raised his head. He had a skinny face that was now chalk white—either out of anger or fear.

Jupiter added. "And to your father, of course."

"He'll just laugh at you. He doesn't care what I do," said the boy. It should sound uninvolved, but the bitterness was obvious.



“But not the police,” Pete countered. “You sneaked around here and probably wanted to break in.”

Alex Hamilton got up. He didn’t let it get to him that easy. “That won’t do you much good either,” he said with his chin outstretched. “I’m a private investigator.”

Jupe and Pete couldn’t believe their ears. Speechless, they stared at the boy. Then Jupe was the first to respond. “Say that again.”

“I’m a private investigator,” Alex repeated.

“Listen to this, Pete,” Jupiter said dryly. “Have you ever heard of a rival in Rocky Beach?”

“Not that I know of.” Pete laughed.

“The other guy you were with the other night is also a private investigator, right?” Jupiter had decided to take a shot and watched Alex’s response. He seemed to flinch, but he didn’t say anything.

Jupiter pulled Pete into the far corner of the trailer and turned on the radio. Frank Sinatra was singing ‘Strangers in the Night’. Jupiter set the device so loud that Alex couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“Do you believe him?” he asked Pete.

“Not a word.” He looked genuinely offended. Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as he always did when he was thinking sharply or was not completely conclusive.

“It does not matter if he’s lying or not,” he said in Pete’s ear. “Anyway, I feel like we’re making a mistake if we ask him if he’s here for the yellow painting. I think it would be better if he did not know about our suspicions.”

Alex had been watching them closely the whole time. When Jupiter turned halfway and blocked the way for Pete, he took the opportunity. He leapt to the door, turned the key, and rushed out into the night.

Again, Jupiter and Pete were stunned. Pete did not even try to pursue him. From the window, they saw their visitor swinging over the wall.

“He’s pretty fast,” said Pete.

“And we,” Jupiter said, “are pretty stupid.”

The price the camel-hair man paid for the yellow painting the next day was modest. Jupiter had briefed both Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda on the sale, and his uncle agreed to get rid of the item that Aunt Mathilda hated so much.

The silent customer paid \$350 to Aunt Mathilda for it. That was more than twice the sum Uncle Titus had paid at the auction in Santa Paula.

The Three Investigators also had nothing against the sale. When the customer stowed the artwork in the trunk of his Buick and drove back onto the road, Bob also started his Beetle, which he had parked inconspicuously in front of the salvage yard. Pete sat next to Bob, Jupe lay in the back seat and held his head down until the camel-hair man had passed them.

“He really has a square skull,” Bob said devoutly. He had the feeling of having to make good weather with a few affable remarks because he had let his friends down the last night.

Jupe and Pete did not reply. Pete thought of his girlfriend Kelly, and that there was probably something more pleasant and meaningful than to drive haphazardly after a man who was dressed too warmly, and who had just legally purchased a painting. And Pete had to think of Pythagoras again when he heard the word square skull.

The man in front was a good, experienced driver. At the height of Camarillo, they got on the busy State Route 1. They were silent, because Bob had to concentrate on not to lose the

Buick. Every now and then he left a greater distance so that his Beetle did not attract attention.

"If this goes on like this, we'll be in Mexico by dawn," Jupiter flattened.

"Big joke," Pete retorted.

Bob grinned with relief. The mood became more relaxed again.

As the outskirts of Los Angeles approached, the Buick turned left onto the Santa Monica Freeway. With the Beetle in tow, he now drove due east. The traffic was getting heavier and heavier. Behind them, the sun sank over the Pacific towards the horizon and bathed the coastal landscape in an unreal light of yellow, gold and red.

Jupiter asked, "Do you know that on our freeways, on the average there's a breakdown every 58 seconds during peak traffic hours?"

Pete moaned. "Don't you have something else to talk about?" The Buick left the freeway towards Farmers Market. Bob followed suit.

"I have," Jupiter started again after a short pause. "I once read a story about a man looking at a picture with trees. In one corner he discovers a small red dot, but he thinks nothing of it. The next day, his gaze falls on the painting again. The red dot is no longer where it was before. And some trees have disappeared, except for the stumps."

Jupiter continued: "On the day after next, a few trees are still missing, and the red dot is somewhere else again. The man almost despairs his sanity, but first he goes to the police, but they can't find anything suspicious." Jupiter took another meaningful break. "On the fourth day, the picture shows trucks transporting away the cut trees."

"That's enough," Pete said.

"Could be Edgar Allan Poe," Bob said. After all, he was, after Jupiter, the most well-read of the three. Books were his passion, among other things, and he had once worked at a library.

The Buick in front of them seemed to reach his destination at any moment. He was slowing down as they rolled past Hancock Park.

"Come on," Bob hissed. "We have other things to do."

As if the camel-hair man had heard it, he turned through a gate. Bob drove on a block and found a parking lot by the side of the road. They got out and ran back.

A rather rickety blue Ford drove past them and stopped a few feet in front of Bob's Beetle. They weren't watching him.

The driveway belonged to a well-maintained building from the early years. On one side of the archway was a not-quite-new sign: 'Safer Security Limited'.

"So, so," Bob murmured. They watched as the camel-hair man stopped in the courtyard, got out, walked to the trunk with the yellow painting in it, then paused, and with his tripping footsteps, disappeared into one of the entrances.

Jupiter closed his eyes and tried to decipher something about the company name.

## 5. Bob's Solo Effort

Bob looked over it with a lot of effort. "My contact lenses tell me that there's something else there," he said. Before they could hold him back, he marched off and crossed the yard.

"Hey, what's he doing now?" From the driveway, Jupiter and Pete watched as Bob, instead of turning back, jumped up the few steps to a door and disappeared behind it.

"Somebody's trying to make amends," Jupiter growled, "and with such a solo effort. He'll get his ass kicked."

Under the company name 'Safer Security Limited' read: 'Vaults and Safes of all kinds—Production, Sales and Consulting' with a phone number, in which Bob took note of. He then went in the entrance.

A quarter of an hour passed and nothing happened except that the two became more and more nervous by the minute. The company Safer Security Limited had swallowed Bob Andrews and did not want to give him back.

"I can't possibly get in there," Jupiter said. "That man knows me."

"I know," Pete replied, "so I'm gonna go see what's going on."

"And if you don't come back, how do I get back to Rocky Beach?" Jupiter flattened out, although he didn't really feel like telling lazy jokes.

"On foot," Pete returned in the same tone. "You'll lose more pounds than on any diet."

At the same moment, the door over there opened. The first to come out was Bob Andrews. He was followed by a tall man with an almost snow-white wreath of hair. He wore a grey suit with shirt and tie and expressed an epitome of seriousness, noticeable even from a distance. The last to come out was the camel-hair man, who then kept very close to the tall man.

"Well, that's—" Pete whispered and pressed himself even closer to the wall of the entrance gate.

They saw Bob talking to the two men, especially the tall one. He then walked passed them and went two steps ahead.

"They probably want to take him to the Buick," Jupiter whispered.

But the two men stopped halfway, did not budge. At the same moment, Bob shook hands with them, and took a measured step towards the gate. He walked past the two of them and gave them a sign.

Together they retreated a few steps further, just enough to keep the Buick in sight.

The two men were now at the car. The camel-hair man opened the trunk, and the man with the silver hair seemed to take a look inside and then left. The camel-hair man leaned over the trunk, spread his arms as far as he could to lift a huge painting out and then single-handedly took it back into the house.

Without a word, they went back to the Beetle, and Bob drove off.

"All right," Jupiter said. "We'll talk about your solo effort. What does this company do?"

Bob told the two about his insights into the inner workings of Safer Security Limited. "Makes a very serious impression, this company," Bob said. "And the offices are full of huge yellow paintings." Apart from the flashy pictures, of which at least a dozen embellished several office walls, he had not noticed anything special.

Bob continued: "Before anyone spoke to me about what I'm looking for, I went to the first person I met in the hallway. That was the one with the silver hair. His name is William Ashley and is the boss. I told him that we were three children who wanted to give our father a safe for his precious stamps on his fiftieth birthday."

Telling his story distracted Bob from driving. He had to brake sharply in order not to hit the front car in the stop-and-go traffic. Right behind them, the tyres of a blue Ford squeaked even louder.

They made a detour through Farmers Market. Jupiter loved their collection of fruit and vegetable shops, street kitchens and sausage stalls with their distinctive smells.

"Come with me," he said sniffing, "I'll buy you a round of hot dogs." The last quarter of an hour had struck him on the stomach, and now the hunger became more intense.

They weaved their way through the colourful stalls and came to the central square with foods from all over the world. Here, they found spring rolls and waffles, pretzels and Berliners, hamburgers and blinis—and hot dogs.

"Make mine with a double helping of ketchup," Jupiter told the seller. The two also got hotdogs and the First Investigator paid for them. Very quickly they gobbled up their food. As a punishment for Bob, Jupiter ordered another hot dog especially for himself.

On their way out, the First Investigator suddenly said: "I'll be right back. Wait for me here." Without waiting for an answer, he went off. Fifty yards in front of them was a phone booth. Jupiter took out some coins out of his pocket and called Lys.

"Listen, I need you to do me a favour."

"Always," Lys said, and Jupiter blushed a little.

After all Lys was already a real young woman, the star of the college and already successful as an actress in several movies. On top of that, she looked so gorgeous that Jupiter lost his head the first time he saw her. And that happened very rarely.

"Where are you calling from?" Lys asked.

"From Los Angeles."

"What a shame."

Jupiter cleared his throat in embarrassment, especially since he could not think of a suitable answer. So he decided to ignore the compliment. "You told me the other day about an acquaintance who works in the vault business."

"Where?"

"In the vault business."

It took some time for Lys to remember Harold Bannister, whom she had mentioned very casually in a conversation with Jupiter sometime ago. She had almost forgotten about it.

"You're incredible!"

"Why?"

"Because you have such a fabulous memory," she breathed.

"Thank you. Please call him and get from him everything he knows about a company called Safer Security Limited and a William Ashley. That's probably the boss or founder or someone from the company. Their business has everything to do with safes."

"Is that all?" Lys sounded disappointed.

"Will you do this for me?"

"Sure, Jupe," came off the phone.

"You're wonderful," Jupe said firmly. "And one more thing, please."

"Yes?"

"Could you do it now? I'll call you back in ten minutes."

Jupiter thought it's best not to wait for the answer in the first place and hung up. He went to the other two, who were now leaning on Bob's Beetle, and borrowed a few coins just in case. Then he strolled back to the phone booth. Lys's voice sounded a little businesslike on her report. Harold, the vault specialist, knew nothing exciting about the company. It was founded more than three decades ago by John Ashley. And soon it gained an excellent reputation in the vault industry. Their safes were considered to be technically superior and were reasonably priced. They were also good in providing service and advice.

There had been rumours of turbulence once, when John Ashley retired and wanted one of his two sons, William and Burt, to take over the business.

"Harold says there was a family argument then, and the company's reputation must have suffered as a result," Lys continued.

"What happened next?" Jupiter asked.

"Burt was just as stubborn as his father and he went off to Europe," said Lys. "So as it was, William had to take over the company, although he was reluctant to do so. His whole heart is supposedly devoted to painting, but without success. However, the company has regained its grip under his leadership, Harold says, but insiders claim that William wants to leave this business today rather than tomorrow. But he cannot sell it. Before his father's death, William is said to have promised him that the company would always remain an Ashley company."

"You're fabulous, Lys," Jupiter said, vowing to spend a whole afternoon and evening with Lys on the beach on the first day of their vacation—all alone, just the two of them.

The return trip to Rocky Beach became a nightmare. All the trucks and cars in the region seemed to have conspired to be on State Route 1 that evening. There was enough time for Jupiter to pass on to his friends what Lys had told him.

"If it's necessary, we can surely persuade Uncle Titus to go on a little trip to Los Angeles in the next few days. I bet he's interested in safes," Jupiter said.

Pete nodded. "Sure. And for his interest in this case."

## 6. A Creep on the Phone

When Bob turned into the salvage yard, Jupiter was the first to see Lys with her bicycle at the trailer. He got out and looked at her in surprise.

"How'd you know we were coming back now?" he asked her.

"I didn't know. I was hoping so." She was sweaty, which wasn't her style. A few of her long blond hair, which Jupiter liked, clung to her forehead.

"Is something wrong?" Jupiter asked.

"Maybe. You must know that better than I do. Someone called me half an hour ago. He told me to tell the three of you to keep your hands off the painting thing."

Bob and Pete was already out of the car and heard what Lys said. Now all three of them stood there, thunderstruck.

"Oh no," Bob finally said. Perhaps I took the wrong approach after all. I should not have rushed into it." He avoided looking at the other two.

"What voice did he have?" Jupiter wanted to know. "Perhaps a soft, pleasant one?"

"On the contrary. He spoke tough and harsh. Sounded mean, like a creep at the movies. Like one who walks over dead bodies when someone gets in his way."

"Is that how Silver Hair speaks?" Pete turned to Bob.

"Not with me, anyway," Bob thought for a moment. "I don't think he can talk the way Lys described it. Somehow he's... too posh."

Jupe remembered how Silver Hair had the camel-hair man carry the monster of paintings by himself into the house.

"And what else did he say?" Pete asked.

Lys hesitated a moment too long.

"Come on, Lys," Bob urged. "We need to know everything, you know, right?"

"He didn't say anything else," Lys said and got on her bike. "Except that something can happen when you stick your nose in things that don't concern you. Sorry, I've gotta go now."

The three watched as she rode off and gave them a short wave. The greeting was somewhat miserable. At the junction to the road, she had to wait until a blue Ford passed. Then she disappeared.

Bob scratched his head, Jupiter pinched his lower lip, and Pete had buried both arms helplessly in the pockets of his jeans.

"Somehow," he muttered, "we're about to get on someone's toes. But why?"

Jupe pulled himself together and decided to take the matter from the positive side. "At least one thing is clear now," he said with a sharp sideways glance at Bob, who had begun to use the tip of his shoe to draw right-angled triangles and squares on the ground. "There's something about the yellow painting."

They went into the trailer. Pete and Bob had settled on sleeping there that night again. It had not been easy to convince their parents of the urgent necessity of this, especially the night before their geometry exams. But they did get permission after all.

Again there was a starry night. Again the moon was so silvery.

"How did the story with the picture and the red dot actually end?" Pete turned to Jupe after they had slipped into their sleeping bags.

“In the end, it was full of tree stumps. That’s all.”

“And the man?”

“He went crazy after all. I think so, anyway. I read the story when I was a kid.”

“Tomorrow,” Bob said, “I’ll check on Edgar Allan Poe.”

They mastered their geometry work brilliantly. The Three Investigators juggled with right-angled triangles so skilfully that even old Mr Pythagoras would have been impressed.

Immediately after returning from school there was a briefing at Headquarters. Jupiter urged progress in the case of the yellow painting, at least he wanted to present some results to Uncle Titus. The conclusion, however, was sobering. They had nocturnal visitors, mysterious red and black ink drawings under a yellow landscape painting, and an anonymous caller who threatened them. Otherwise they had nothing.

“How did the guy who called Lys know she was with us?” Pete thought out loud.

“Exactly,” Jupiter said. “Lys got some information from Harold Bannister. Is it possible that there was some sort of link here?” He did not know the answer to that question.

Jupiter then went to the phone, dialled Chief Reynold’s number and pressed the button for the loudspeaker connected to the phone. This gadget made it possible for the others to listen in on telephone calls.

“Good afternoon, Chief. This is Jupiter Jones. How are you?”

“If not for The Three Investigators, the rise in crime makes my job safer day by day!” Reynolds snapped. His voice sounded tinny through the speaker. “What’s up?”

The three boys had a special relationship of trust with Chief Reynolds. He was always available with his information and appreciated The Three Investigators for their solid and successful work. In many cases they had helped solve crimes that the police had been pursuing for a long time. On the other hand, Reynolds and his men had occasionally reprimanded the three young detectives for going into the caves of vicious lions. That was the only point where Reynolds was dissatisfied with The Three Investigators. Sometimes he considered their approach too daring. But secretly, he admired the boys for their courage and would have wished that his staff had the imagination and enthusiasm of The Three Investigators.

“First,” said Jupiter objectively, “we would like to know if there is anything the police have on a company by the name of Safer Security Limited. And second, whether your computer has the names William Ashley and Alex Hamilton.”

“You know that for data protection and privacy reasons, I may not give you any direct or indirect insight into our data processing system,” replied Reynolds.

“Of course,” Jupiter said, winking at Pete and Bob.

At the other end of the line, they heard Reynolds keying into the computer. The police chief wasn’t actually authorized to do what he was doing, but he had their explicit and iron-clad promise that they would never reveal to third parties any information they received from him in this way.

“William Ashley—No,” came Reynolds’s voice. “And what was the other one’s name?”

“Alex Hamilton,” Jupiter said. It took another half minute for Reynolds to get back.

“I have here an Alex Hamilton from Ventura,” said the policeman. “Is he from there and is 18 years old?”

“Yes.”

“A few robberies, a burglary,” Reynolds said impassively.

“He’s still practising.” Reynolds was a good-hearted man. But has his frustration with the misery and consequences of what he had to deal with on a daily basis. He sometimes dumped in slogans that sounded sarcastic and raw—at least in the ears of people who didn’t know him.

Jupiter thanked him and hung up. The next steps were quickly decided. There was nothing else to do but to search for Alex Hamilton and somehow get to his clients through him. That’s what Jupiter and Bob did.

Pete was the only one who had not met the camel-hair man or silver hair man. So he was to go to Safer Security Limited the next day as the companion of Uncle Titus, who in the first place, had to go to Los Angeles.

“I’ve wanted something like this for a long time,” Uncle Titus laughed when The Three Investigators told him their plan. “Will you stay for coffee?” he asked.

“No time,” Jupiter replied. “We have a very strict client who wants to see results.”

Uncle Titus smiled, and the detectives went off.

They took the bus to the coast, to the port of Ventura.

The only Hamilton on the phone book was Jerry, who lived in a dark alley near the vegetable market. They got out, walked two blocks further. A little later they were standing in front of an ugly three-storey building that was probably eighty years old and had certainly never been renovated. The façade had crumbled plaster, and at the top under the roof, shards hung from two windows. The fact that most of the neighbouring houses looked similar was probably a small consolation for the inhabitants.

They rang Jerry Hamilton’s bell, but nothing happened. So they looked for another apartment on the ground floor and found one with the sign saying ‘Virginia Bloomingdale’. They rang and an old lady came out. She had a well-groomed appearance and straight posture, which was a much more upmarket appearance than seemed appropriate to the area.

“Mr Hamilton isn’t here,” said Mrs Bloomingdale gently. “If you’re lucky, you’ll find him in his drug store.”

“What if we’re not lucky?” Pete asked cheekily.

“Then in a pub,” Mrs Bloomingdale replied. She looked so distressed that one could see how sorry the man was. “But there are too many that he frequents.”

They got the address of the drug store, wandered through Ventura and got lucky after about half an hour.

Jerry Hamilton was a man with a striking red face and so small that he almost disappeared among his cans, bottles and plastic packs and barely towered over the counter next to the cash register.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob mumbled their names and asked if they could speak to Alex Hamilton.

“Al?” the man asked back. His tone revealed that he was already used to people who came to him and enquired about his son.

“How am I supposed to know where he is?”

“When did you last see him?” Bob asked.

Mr Hamilton looked up to Bob with a mixture of suspicion and indifference. “First of all, I don’t remember. And second of all, why does this concern you?”

He hid behind his barricade of goods and pretended to be busy. But Bob wondered how long ago the last customer had entered this miserable shop and how many hours would pass



before the next. Or will the owner drop the blinds soon to go to one of the many pubs in this desolate area.

There was nothing they could do. The most specific information they could get from Alex Hamilton's father was something he said to them as they walked out shrugging their shoulders: "If you want to know where he is, you'd better go to the police." Bob growled and felt anger rising inside him.

On the way back, through the long dark streets with the exhaust fumes of the ebbing rush hour, they talked little. Jupiter was annoyed as everything was going through in his head: red dots, tree stumps and squares, and the question of what kind of father old Hamilton was.

When she opened the door, Mrs Bloomingdale looked at them as nicely as she did the first time.

"Sorry for disturbing you again," Jupiter said and bowed slightly, "Actually, we're looking for Alex Hamilton, and his father says he doesn't know where he is."

"And you thought maybe that weird old neighbour knows something, didn't you?" She nodded to them and waved them in. A dark corridor led into a small living room with friendly oak furniture and bright floral wallpaper. "And now you're afraid you will not be leaving here until tomorrow morning because I'm telling you my whole life story, aren't you?" Mrs Bloomingdale had directed them to the sofa and smiled.

"There's nothing I'd rather do," she started again. "But first of all, you're a little too young for me, and besides—"

She paused for a moment and put a finger on the tip of her nose. Then she kept the second reason to herself.

"So, what do you want to know?"

Instead of her life story, she told them everything she knew about the Hamiltons. "Of course I shouldn't have told you all this," she said at the end. "But when you're my age, you know what kind of people you're dealing with." She looked at them one by one. "And you have good faces."

The Three Investigators thanked and shook hands with her.

They had to wait quite a long time for a bus and once again they were annoyed with the public transport system around Los Angeles. By the time they got on a bus, it was already dark.

On the way back, they discussed what they had learned. Al Hamilton was always in some sort of trouble. He had long left high school and since then had occasional work.

"He's pretty clever," Virginia Bloomingdale had said, but her expression sounded strange, "but I don't think Al really knows the difference between good and evil." Obviously the distinction between good and evil was very important for Virginia Bloomingdale. She apparently did not know that Alex Hamilton had already come into conflict with the law. And she didn't know who he was dealing with either. The only thing she could remember was that his father once mentioned that he had met his son in a bar called 'Haiti' at the harbour front. Incidentally, she didn't say anything bad about old Hamilton, whom she had repeatedly called Jerry. She was full of compassion for him.

"Maybe the two are friends," Pete said.

"I hope so," Jupiter said.

## 7. Uncle Titus's Big Performance

Pete would never have thought that Titus Jones was such an actor. They were sitting in the sanctum of Safer Security Limited, in the boss's office. Uncle Titus, the salvage yard owner and used goods dealer, posed as an odd millionaire who no longer sleeps for fear of his cash assets, and who does not trust the banks and therefore absolutely needs a safe at home. And he acted so daringly that Pete broke out a sweat while seated next to him.

Mr William Ashley, whom The Three Investigators referred to as Silver Hair, listened to all the dumb but dignified hogwash without a frown.

"And when I think of my stamp collection," Titus Jones began again. "I may say it is of considerable value." He twirled the ends of his black moustache.

Pete had never heard of Jupiter's uncle being a philatelist. Probably, Pete thought and suppressed a grin that Titus Jones considers the Blue Mauritius a rare seaweed rather than the queen of stamps.

"Of course," said Uncle Titus, "as a passionate collector, you want to have these wonderful objects around you and not put them in the care of a bank."

"I see," Mr Ashley said. Now Pete thought he saw a slight twitch in the corner of his eye.

"The question is when could your company deliver," Uncle Titus said cheerfully.

"It all depends on which type you choose, Mister—"

"Hillary," Titus Jones replied without hesitation. He really prepared splendidly for his role, Pete thought with relief. But the decisive thing was still ahead of them. At some point Titus Jones had to get down to business.

"Well," he said at that moment, pointing to the painting that adorned the wall behind Silver Hair. It portrayed a herd of rather yellow calves in a rather yellow meadow. "It doesn't have to be as large as the safe in which you would place this work of art."

Pete found the approach Uncle Titus took was not particularly elegant. But at least it was better than nothing.

"Do you think it's a work of art that belongs in a safe?" Mr Ashley asked calmly. "It's mine."

"Yours?" The millionaire Hillary was astonished and couldn't hide it. Mr Ashley, in his fine suit and with his equally fine manners, apparently did not match the image of the creator of such artwork.

"That's the way it is. All the paintings you see here in the office, I painted them myself." William Ashley casually said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that the boss of a company like Safer Security Limited paints huge landscape artwork. "And you like them?"

If Uncle Titus hadn't been so confused, he would have noticed the compassion that resonated in Ashley's voice. But so he had lost the thread and looked more like a boxer who has long led by points and now suddenly had to take a beating.

"Yes, yes," Uncle Titus nodded to the company boss. All right, he thought at the same moment that Mathilda did not hear that. Suddenly he longed to return to his salvage yard in Rocky Beach.

Pete thought it was time to get involved. "Frankly, it's not my taste," he said bravely, smirking at Silver Hair.

“Not mine either,” he said, smiling at Titus Jones. Pete was stunned. and it seemed that Ashley enjoyed the amazement of his visitors.

“Of course, you’re wondering why I paint something that doesn’t suit my taste,” he said. “It’s like kind of an experiment—to see if I could master the craft. And a little—well, a fad that I always use the same idyllic motif.” Silver Hair showed his fine smile incessantly. “The painting that really interests me,” he continued, hesitating for a moment, as if he didn’t know whether to continue speaking, “hangs in my studio.”

“And is this somewhere in Los Angeles, in the attic of an old building, with a wide view of the city?” Pete tried to get more details.

“Not so, young friend,” Ashley said. “It’s thirty miles from here—lonely and deserted and directly in a bay northwest of Santa Barbara.”

“I know the area like the back of my hand,” Pete lied. “I’m sure I’ve driven past it many times before.”

“Hardly. At this point the coast is so rocky and steep that the road has to go back almost two miles into the country. I usually get to my house by boat.”

“And you sit there and paint?” Uncle Titus asked sympathetically. “Of course, only if the company gives you the time.”

“That’s right, Mr Hillary,” Ashley said.

“Excuse me?” stammered Uncle Titus. He had forgotten his name was Hillary and blushed. Hopefully Silver Hair did not notice anything, Pete thought, before beginning to sweat again. But the boss of Safer Security Limited now seemed lost in thoughts of the modern art he produced at his bay home. He gave a fine, indulgent, and somewhat mysterious smile again.

There was a knock on the door, and the camel-hair man came in. He stopped at the door and looked at the two visitors without a greeting. “May I speak to you for a moment, Mr Ashley?”

Silver Hair stood up, mumbled an apology and went out. Through the glass wall, Pete could see the two of them outside in the corridor. The camel-hair man spoke something to his boss. When Ashley came back, he said in front of Titus Jones, “Sorry, gentlemen. Urgent business.”

“I suggest you think again about which type of safe you want. My secretary will give you all the brochures and you can contact me when you have made your decision. We will then do our utmost to meet the delivery requirements.” He now spoke coolly and business-like but he looked rather nervous.

They said goodbye and went to the secretary’s office.

Miss Clayburn was a roundish woman in her late forties and about to turn grey working in that company. As she was collecting the brochures for Uncle Titus, the phone rang. Miss Clayburn answered. Then she nodded and proceeded to put the call through to her boss. “Mr Ashley,” she said, “once again your brother.” She pressed a button and dropped the receiver.

Titus Jones poked Pete’s in his ribs. “Come,” he whispered, “let’s go.”

## 8. Attack on Jupiter

It was a very warm evening again. Jupiter decided not to sleep in his bed today, but out in the open air in front of the trailer. Everything went through his mind, and he was annoyed that he just couldn't think clearly. Virginia Bloomingdale and old Hamilton crossed his mind, and then he recalled the voice of the camel-hair man again.

He fell asleep and soon began to dream. He saw Pete, Bob, Lys, and Silver Hair all painting a giant picture with a rotating red dot and a growing number of lamp posts taken away by trucks without cabs. The truck had the words 'Safer Security Limited' on it. Then Lys, with long yellow hair, rode her yellow bicycle to a clearing, while waving and shouting to him to keep his hands off the yellow painting.

Jupiter was about to answer that they had an assignment from Uncle Titus, but he couldn't say anything. Something was in his mouth, and he wanted to spit it out, but even that didn't work. A hand pushed the stuff back into his mouth. He tried to push the hand away, but in vain. His hands and legs were hurting and could not be moved.

Jupiter opened his eyes. The moon was again silvery in the sky. Against the bluish background of the night, the three squatting figures appeared. Jupiter tried to say something, but one hand was holding a gag to his mouth and squeezing it tight.

"Make sure he doesn't choke." The voice came from the figure pinning his lower legs.

Jupiter wanted to shake them off but it was impossible. He heard himself moaning. His heartbeat roared in his ears.

The guy pinning down his legs was masked, and that's all he could see. The second, who pressed Jupiter's right arm to the ground with his knees, wore a cap deep into his forehead and had a red scarf below his eyes. As to the man on his left arm, Jupiter saw only his back.

"We'll loosen up if you do not mess with us, okay?" It was again the man on Jupiter's legs who spoke.

Jupiter nodded. He couldn't fight them after all. He heard himself grunting a little. The grips of the three loosened a little.

"You have been warned not to stick your nose in things that do not concern you. You have disregarded this warning." The man on Jupiter's legs had a falsetto voice. "That's why we're teaching you a lesson now." He stood up and released Jupiter's legs.

He took some newspapers from the inside pocket of his anorak. He crumpled it into a big ball and suddenly brought out a small bottle in his hand.

"That should do it," he chuckled. He poured out the bottle contents over the paper ball, took out a small shiny object from his jacket and walked the few steps over to the trailer. "You all go to school after all, you three big detectives. Why don't you concentrate on your homework and enjoy the holidays like all the other good guys, huh?" The man lifted the bale of paper up like a teacher lifting a pointer.

Such a talkative idiot, Jupiter got annoyed. For a moment, he wondered if he should try to break free. At the same time he cursed himself because he was not physically fit, despite the four kilos that he no longer carried around with him. Pete would tense his muscles, he thought bitterly, and these three sausages would fly through the air. But it didn't make any sense. Besides, his arms were already numb.

From the shining object leaped a bluish flame. The man bent over and pushed the paper ball under the trailer. "Watch closely," he said in Jupiter's direction. Now he held the lighter to the newspaper. "It will be a lesson to you."

They're insane, Jupiter thought. They actually want to cremate the trailer, with everything in it, from the computer to the photo lab and the telephone. He kicked out furiously in the air. The two figures holding his arms pushed him to the ground again with all their might. Jupiter almost swallowed the gag. He felt the sweat on his forehead and under his armpits.

The paper ball had turned into a burning ball. Flames appeared at the bottom of the trailer.

It's not true, Jupiter thought. It must be one of his full moon dreams. He wanted to pinch his arm, but he couldn't. The figure on the right seemed to look at him derisively. The one on the left still has his back on him.

The paper turned black with red spots.

"This stupid thing won't catch fire," the leader cried and kicked at the embers. He paused for a moment. "Why be so cumbersome when it can be easy? Surely you are not sleeping in front of a locked front door, are you?" He went to the trailer door and opened it.

Next time I'll lock the door and hide the key, Jupiter swore to himself. But then he remembered that there could be no next time—at least not with this trailer. And which good fairy would give The Three Investigators a new trailer?

"There you go," the man said. He was standing at the doorway. In one hand he held the petrol bottle and in the other the lighter. Then he triumphantly stretched both out towards Jupiter, mocking him.

"Come on! Get on with it!" The one with the red scarf obviously became impatient. Jupiter remembered that he had once possessed a right arm. But now he felt nothing more to the right of his shoulder blades, and it wasn't much better to the left either.

Suddenly a loud booming voice was heard: "Hey you! What are you doing here!"

Jupe jumped and tipped his head back with all his might. He recognized that voice. A white nightgown came up to him, with something elongated pointing to the trailer. Aunt Mathilda could undoubtedly be seen from Jupiter's reverse perspective. She quickly approached, wielding a baseball bat. As much as Jupiter could remember, it hung untouched against the wall in the hallway.

"Damn it," croaked the leader, "get out of here!" He threw his arsonist hardware to the ground, jumped down the small stairs and ran away.

"You idiot!" the man with the red scarf hissed, jumped up and ran in the same direction. He had not reached ten metres yet when he was caught by the silent being who had held Jupiter's left arm while with his back to him.

Jupiter breathed deeply, closed his eyes and opened them again.

Above him stood Aunt Mathilda. The baseball bat aimed directly at the belly of her nephew, who lay crucified on the ground, unable to do more than put his legs up.

"Heavens! What did those scoundrels do to you?" Aunt Mathilda cried. She bent down and pulled the gag out of Jupiter's mouth. He moaned. Aunt Mathilda sat cross-legged next to Jupiter, lifted his head gently.

Like a baby, Jupiter thought, and decided to enjoy it. His fingertips started to tingle. With the circulation of the blood, the pain returned, but that did not matter now. Slowly he looked around. Over there in the moonlight, stood the trailer, unharmed.

"That was a close call," Jupiter whispered. His lips didn't really go through yet, so that the words only came out muttered. But Aunt Mathilda understood. She shook her fist in the

direction in which the uninvited visitors had disappeared.

“I could have caught all three of them at once,” she growled. She tapped her forehead with her finger and lifted the baseball bat.

Suddenly, something struck Jupiter. He briefly pictured what he saw when the silent man overtook the masked man on the run. It was something about that guy’s running style. “That was Alex Hamilton,” Jupiter whispered. Aunt Mathilda heard but didn’t understand him.

He spent ten minutes relaxing, then Jupiter trotted a lap of honour across the salvage yard. Every step hurt, but obviously he had not suffered any permanent damage. Then he went into the house with Aunt Mathilda, laid down in his bed and slept until late morning.

## 9. The Council of War

Around ten o'clock Aunt Mathilda stood in front of him again with breakfast and steaming coffee.

"Without you, our trailer would now be a heap of ash," Jupiter said and sat up moaning in bed. "I'm really proud of you." He was less proud of himself. It was a bit humiliating to be at the mercy of those three guys.

When Aunt Mathilda saw the blue and dark red bruises on Jupiter's arms, she gave a cry of horror.

"What's the matter now?" Uncle Titus came in. He had heard nothing of the events of the past night, not even Aunt Mathilda's shouting. When he slept, he slept.

"Nothing's going on. But look at your poor nephew." Aunt Mathilda pointed to Jupiter as accusingly as she did to the yellow painting a few days before. "Those criminals!"

Uncle Titus was amazed when Aunt Mathilda told him the whole story. She was very pleased with herself and looked as if she was about to mess with the next unscrupulous gang right away. Uncle Titus did not spare praise for his wife.

As far as these three scoundrels were concerned, Jupiter thought, Aunt Mathilda was absolutely right. They'd have to pay for that. When he tried to bite into a wholemeal croissant, he first noticed how swollen and sensitive his lips had become.

"It's no use. It still hurts too much." His voice sounded pretty miserable. He pushed the plate aside and contented himself with a sip of coffee. It burned like hell.

Uncle Titus twirled his moustache. "Bob and Pete called. At high noon, there's a council of war." He nodded his encouragement to Jupiter and went outside. Jupiter remembered that 'High Noon' with Gary Cooper was Titus Jones's favourite movie.

"That was a mistake. They shouldn't have done that."

Bob was outraged. An arson attack on the trailer Headquarters of The Three Investigators went too far. Pete was just as angry. Jupe had only rolled up a bit of his sleeves. "In the middle of the night, when you were asleep, three of them attacked and maltreated you," cried Pete. "That's the last straw!"

Uncle Titus was also full of energy. "They had their fun. Now it's our turn."

Jupiter laid down more than sitting on Aunt Mathilda's sofa. He pinched his lower lip, which was not so painful anymore. "The only question is who they are." He paused, and then he started thinking out loud. "It's clear as daylight that Alex was there. He was so fast but runs in a weird and funny way. Because he knew that I would recognize him, he always had his back to me. He wanted revenge for Tuesday night."

"If you're right, then probably his companions were also there the first time," Bob said.

"Probably," Jupiter agreed. "And another thing is clear. Professionals, they are not. Alex Hamilton is a greyhound who does this today and that tomorrow, but nothing goes right for him—if what his neighbour said is true. And this guy who tried to torch our trailer was their leader. But he's also a loser. A real gangster would have opened the door and set the trailer on fire from the inside."

Aunt Mathilda had come in. “They’re sausages,” Uncle Titus cried. “Some little bunglers.” He decided to ignore the evil look Aunt Mathilda was giving him.

“That’s the point,” Jupiter sighed, carefully moving his lower jaw back and forth. “By whom? And why? And what does this have to do with the yellow painting?”

Bob had brought along the drawing he had made of the lines and signs on the background of the yellow painting. Now it laid spread out on Aunt Mathilda’s coffee table. Uncle Titus, Bob and Pete bent over it. That could be anything, a plan, a sketch, or just the fantasy creation of an artist who got bored.

“Come on, let’s hear your secret,” growled Bob.

“If you have one,” Pete said.

The Three Investigators looked at each other helplessly. They all had the feeling that they were getting bogged down and not making any progress.

“Nevertheless,” Jupiter sighed, “we have no choice but to pursue every trail. We owe it to Uncle Titus.”

Before Bob and Pete went home, four of them looked at the trailer and the huge black spot left on the side by the failed arsonists.

“If they had an assignment,” Bob thought, “and their employer insists that they fulfil it, then they will come back.” He laid down on his back and tapped the floor of the trailer. “Fortunately, nothing happened. All in one piece.”

“And this ugly grey patch here,” Pete said, pointing to the discolouration caused by the flames on the side, “I’ll paint it tomorrow.”

“Bob’s right,” said Jupiter. “Actually, they have to come back. But why should we wait for them? For tonight, I suggest a visit to the bar.”

Aunt Mathilda insisted that Jupiter lie down again in the afternoon. He didn’t mind. At some point he fell asleep and dreamed of red dots on a yellow painting and of a truck driver who looked like Alex Hamilton, driving around him round and round in ever-closer circles. Then he heard a loud screeching noise like a wood saw felling a tree. That repeated itself three times, then it was over.

“Jupe!” Aunt Mathilda bent over her nephew and tried to wake him gently. “Lys is on the line.”

Jupe groaned and staggered dazed to the phone. “Hi, Lys,” he said as cheerfully as possible. “How are you?”

She didn’t know what Jupiter went through the night before. “That man called again.” She came to the subject. Her voice was factual and nervous at the same time.

“What did he say?” Jupiter asked.

“The same as the first time—that you should keep your hands off things that are none of your business.”

“Anything else?” Jupiter was wide awake.

“Last night’s warning was the last warning.” For a moment it was quiet on the line. “What happened so far?”

“Oh, nothing special,” Jupiter muttered into the phone.

“Come on, tell me.” Lys was persistent, Jupiter knew that. He hadn’t noticed that Aunt Mathilda was standing behind him. Before he knew it, she stretched over his shoulder and took the receiver out of his hand.

“They beat him half-dead,” Aunt Mathilda trumpeted into the phone. “You can’t imagine what he looks like.”

“What does he look like?” Lys wanted to know. Jupiter, who now has his ears close to the phone, could hear that Lys sounded quite worried.



“The day after tomorrow he’ll be a single bruise,” cried Aunt Mathilda. “It’s from this eternal detective game.”

Jupiter took the phone away from her. “I could come by and tell you all about it, couldn’t I?”

“Please do that,” Lys said. “You sound like a guy who really needs to tell someone everything.” Jupe blushed with joy.

Aunt Mathilda was behind him again, this time with a white parcel in her hand. “Here, this is for you. Two pieces of cherry pie. And have a nice afternoon.”

## 10. Haiti and Las Vegas

Darkness had already fallen as they climbed down the bus. The moon was hidden behind a thick blanket of clouds from which threads of rain hung down on the Ventura waterfront. The warmth from the last days was gone. The Three Investigators buttoned up their jackets and marched off, deeper and deeper into the barren streets.

After ten minutes, they were in front of the 'Haiti'. Above the door was a sign with yellow neon lettering. The light on first "i" in the name of the bar had failed. It looked like an ugly tooth gap. What had led the operators of this dull pub to baptize their establishment in this way remained a mystery.

"No palm trees," growled Bob.

"And where are the hula-hula girls?" Pete said and looked around, as if in the next moment a lightly dressed beauty would emerge from the darkness.

"Stop this nonsense!" Jupe made a faltering gesture with his hand and felt a slight pain in his shoulder.

"Well, then," Pete grinned. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, you get the FBI, okay?" He faked a few boxing strokes and disappeared into the bar.

It didn't take half a minute for him to come out again. "There's nobody in this hole. Not our friend Al, not a soul."

"But there should be a bartender..." Jupiter objected.

"Sure thing. I asked him about Al, but he says he's never heard that name before. I just don't think he wanted to say he knows Al. He hesitated a second too long with the answer."

A short distance from the 'Haiti', they saw a hamburger stand. They strolled there. Jupe was content with a currywurst but forwent the French fries. For his strength of self-control, he received the highest praise from his friends.

"Hopefully, with so much discipline, his joy for living will not go overboard." Bob couldn't stop himself from frolicking, as he poked several French fries at once with his plastic fork. "Some people to lose the last bit of vitality with their pounds."

"Don't worry about it," Jupiter returned. "I'm perfectly fine with that little bit of vitality."

He was not back in shape yet. His arms really hurt, and he swore not to look in the mirror when he went to bed. "I suggest we split up. I'll look one way, you two look the other. We'll check out as many pubs as we can and meet back here in an hour. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" he shouted. Pete stretched to his full height. "I'll take on an entire boxing squadron again." He then crumpled up the cardboard tray of his sausage, aimed at the litter bin five metres away and missed.

"See you then." Jupiter pointed northwards. "This is my territory." He ducked into his anorak and marched off. Bob and Pete went in the opposite direction.

"What do we do when we find him?" Pete asked, as the two of them headed for the next bar. Its name was 'Las Vegas' and it attracted passers-by with a neon sign of a slot machine that spit out coins all the time.

"I don't know," Bob said. "Ask if he would invite us over for a double Coke?"

Inside a few elderly men stood at the bar and held on to their glasses. Two were talking about the latest baseball results. Otherwise there was yawning emptiness. "We'll never find our man in pubs like this," Pete grumbled.

"Exactly. You're definitely too young for that, my boy, my mother would say." Bob pulled Pete out by the sleeve.

There were no pub in the next three streets and an alley. No sign of Alex. Next up was a disco. It was crowded with young people, dozens of couples pushed around on the dance floor like herrings in a can. The ear-deafening stomping of the music beat Bob and Pete together like the waves of the Pacific.

"We've got to get through!" Pete put his hands to his mouth as he yelled in Bob's ear.

Bob just nodded and started to push his way through the crowd with his head and elbows. After a short distance pushing, Bob's hand came out and pulled Pete towards himself.

"I just have a thought," Bob yelled in Pete's ear. "What am I supposed to do in here? I don't know what this guy looks like. I'll wait for you outside." Without waiting for an answer, he turned around and pushed his way towards the exit.

Pete circled past the thick belly of a young man, against whom even Jupe would have looked rather lean in his worst times. He reached a column, behind which there was something like an empty space. He stood on his toes. From here he had a good view of the whole place. The music stopped. Over in one corner, a not-so-young disc jockey in a jacket with huge tasteless black and white checks was putting on a new CD. The music restarted and the human bodies began to sway again. Pete caught himself tapping the rhythm with his right foot.

A moment later, he spotted Bob just before the exit. Incidentally, someone showed up at the door. Pete recognized him immediately. It was Alex Hamilton. He was wearing grey jeans and a shabby grey sweater. The red hair hung wet on his face.

"Bob!" Pete yelled with all his might. The music was loud and Bob did not hear him. He suddenly remembered that Bob does not know how Alex looked like.

Pete wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and stared at the young Hamilton. He threw a quick glance into the sea of people and dived in.

"Damn it!" Pete cursed so loudly that some of the visitors looked at him astonished. But he didn't take care, as he stretched his arms forward like a swimmer and pushed the crowd apart.

A minute later, wet with sweat, he reached the door, but Alex Hamilton was not there. Neither was Bob. Pete then went outside. Bob was there and gave a grin. "I was hoping you'd dance a little. I don't want to go into the bars no more." A short distance away, Pete saw Alex Hamilton crossing the road.

"There!" Pete shouted. "He's over there." He sprinted away leaving Bob confused.

"Who?" Bob shouted after Pete and proceeded to follow. Pete just reached the blue Ford that Alex got in. He waited until Alex sat behind the wheel, jumped at the driver's door, ripped it open and squeezed in.

"Hi, Al," he gasped. Young Hamilton said nothing, just looked at Pete in complete surprise. "I think we should have a little talk." Pete chose the most polite tone of voice he could. He then pressed his hand so tightly on Alex's thigh to prevent him from escaping out the passenger door.

Al looked Pete in the face. "Oh, it's you," he said. He was dull and tired, and let himself fall back a little. "But I don't want to talk to you."

Bob then came up beside the car. Pete wound down the window and called out to him: "Get in the back seat!"

“Good evening, everyone,” Bob said neatly, and rested his head on his hand. “My name is Bob Andrews. And what is your name?”

“Tell him to shut up.” Al Hamilton tapped Pete on his shoulder. “And get your paw off my leg.”

Before Pete let go, he leaned over to the right and pressed the safety button on the door. Alex would first have to overcome this obstacle should he decide to try to escape.

Pete saw Al Hamilton had the car key in his right fist, and said: “I need the key, if you don’t mind. We have a little drive ahead of us.” Pete held out his hand, and Al gave him the key. Pete then inserted it into the ignition.

“I hope you can drive,” Al said, trying to sound as defiant as possible.

But Pete had a funny feeling in his stomach. This boy, he thought, seemed glad that they tracked him down.

“Very kind,” he praised and started. A few minutes later they drove up in front of Haiti. In the shadow of the building stood Jupiter. It was over an hour and he was waiting for them. You could see on his hunched shoulders that he was freezing.

Pete stopped the car in front of Jupiter, and Bob wound down the screen and called out to him: “Jupe, get in quick!” to the surprise of the First Investigator.

“The same blue Ford that we saw the day before yesterday?” Jupe said as he got into the back seat beside Bob. “Not really my type.”

Pete quickly briefed Jupiter where he met Al. They drove around the block twice to crank up the heater in the car. Outside, one gust of wind followed another, and with the rain, the temperature fell.

“All right,” Jupiter said from behind Al, “and now it’s your turn.” Al was silent. “We want to know who your employers are.”

“I told you before, I’m a detective. I don’t say everything twice.” Apparently Al Hamilton had decided to try it with impudence.

Jupiter became sharp. “Usually detectives don’t rob sleeping people at night and try to torch trailers.” Al wanted to say something, but Jupiter continued: “You can spare the lies. I recognized you.”

“How’s that, huh?”

“You have to get used to a different running style.”

That sat in. It looked like Al was anxiously pulling his head between his shoulders.

“You have two minutes to think. Then I want to know who sent you and your friends.” Jupiter looked at his watch.

The four sat silently in Alex Hamilton’s not-quite-new blue Ford. The rain clapped on the windows. It was a miserable weather and a miserable situation.

The two minutes were up. “Okay,” Pete said. “If you don’t want it this way...” Without finishing the sentence, he drove off.

Almost at a walking pace, the car rolled through the bleak streets of the harbour district. In some places there were already huge puddles, but the sky kept its floodgates open, as if it wanted to wash away all the dirt and filth from this area.

After a few miles, Pete turned off to Rocky Beach. Slowly they rolled through the main street of the small town. Pete stopped in the middle of a square. He took off the key and put it in his pocket. Then he pointed to the other side of the street.

“This is your last chance. You talk or all four of us go in there now.” Across the street was the Rocky Beach Police Headquarters.

Al sighed and slipped deeper into his seat. He was very uncomfortable. He could easily figure out that the cops wouldn’t let him leave so quickly.

"I don't know him. He's just called," said Alex finally.

"You mean someone you don't know called you and got you to go and rob other people?" Bob got mad. He had had enough of the back and forth.

"OK, so what's the name of the man who called you?" Jupiter asked calmly, as he had the feeling that Alex Hamilton would be a rich source of information. He wasn't as goofy as he portrayed himself. Like Pete sensed earlier, Jupiter suspected that Al seemed relieved that The Three Investigators had caught him.

But Al had gone silent again.

"Well, let's go then," Pete said and opened the driver's door. Bob wanted to hold him back as the rain would have soaked them to the skin before they got to the police headquarters. But Pete's determination seemed to go on to Al Hamilton. They didn't have to ask anything anymore. He told the whole story—or at least what he knew about it.

Last week his father had told him about an old school friend who occasionally could get small jobs for him. "I know you could do with a few small jobs," old Hamilton muttered. Two days later, a call came. Alex was supposed to look around the premises of a certain Titus Jones inconspicuously and then report back.

Finally the rain had stopped. Pete put the key into the ignition and turned on the windshield wiper. It was like a curtain being drawn away.

"Again, what is the name of the caller?" Jupiter continued.

"Arthur Hayles. Or something like that," Al replied. "I'm not exactly sure. He mumbled pretty much."

"He called you to set our trailer on fire?" Jupiter asked.

Al Hamilton looked up at Pete as if looking for help. "That's what we did by ourselves. The first two calls sounded like..." Al paused, looking for the right word.

"Like what? Come on, tell us," Pete urged.

"... Like he was really pissed off." Al finally continued.

"So what? What do we have to do with this?" Bob asked.

"You followed the man from Safer Security Limited to Los Angeles. We told Hayles on the phone, and then he was pissed off."

The Three Investigators sat there, silenced. Only Al Hamilton was pleased with the impact of his message. Finally, he was no longer defensive.

"That means," Bob said in disbelief, "you've been following us?"

"Indeed. There and back," Alex confirmed.

If it had not been so dark in the car, Bob would have seen Jupiter turn pale with annoyance. "And we didn't notice," Jupiter murmured.

"OK, and who are your two friends?" Jupiter wanted to know.

It took a few seconds for Al Hamilton to answer. "Phil Jordan," he said quietly.

Only the devil knows, Jupiter thought, if the name is true, but he could tell us a lot more.

Suddenly a uniformed person appeared in front of car and interrupted the investigators' interrogation. Pete wound the window down, and a policeman bent down. "I'm glad you have so much to say in the middle of the square in front of our headquarters. How about you move to the side of the road now, okay?"

"Sorry," Pete said and turned on the car lights. For Al Hamilton, that moment was long enough to escape The Three Investigators for the second time. In a flash, he undid the safety button on the door, pulled the doorknob and the next second, he disappeared into the darkness.

"Your friend's in a hurry," said the policeman. "Or maybe it's not a friend at all?"

Pete smiled at the policeman as he started the car. “Oh yes, he is our friend. He even lends us his car.”

## 11. Who is Mr Hayles?

Bob was jogging through the park during his lunch break. He absolutely wanted to don the new fiery red sports suit that matched well to his blond hair. Anyway, that's what Elizabeth and Kelly said. And of course Lys, too, but she had eyes for Jupiter.

Now Bob jumped up the stairs to the first floor of Sax Sendler's music agency, tossed the wildly-striped training jacket into a corner and stretched out on a chair, panting.

Along the wall, boxes of brand-new CDs were waiting to be stacked on the shelves. May Sax Sendler's sales increase.

His eyes fell on the newspaper that someone had left on the table. He scanned through the headlines. Once again there had been a brawl in Los Angeles between police officers and a group of youths after one of them had been treated harshly by the cops during an arrest on suspicion of illegal drug possession. Much less conspicuous was the little article next to it. The night before last, unidentified burglars had visited an insurance office branch in the west of the city. The safe was welded open and a handsome sum close to \$60,000 dollars in cash had been taken.

Bob took a deep breath and grabbed a phone book. The insurance company's number was easy to find. Fortunately, the phone had a long cable, so he could move the phone to the furthest corner of the room. Sax, downstairs on the ground floor, did not realize that Bob Andrews was using his work time to do something else.

Looking through the window down to the street, a traffic light had failed. Bob watched as two policemen struggle to control the traffic. At this time of the year, the traffic was not really heavy, so there were not many traffic jams.

At the switchboard of the insurance company, a young lady who answered sounded as nice as the singing salesgirls from 'West Side Story'. That was Elizabeth's favourite video and it moved her to tears at least once a week.

"I'd like to speak to your boss," Bob said.

"I'll put you through to Mr Allison's office. He's our director," said the young lady. Bob resisted the temptation to ask her name.

Someone then, presumably Mr Allison's personal assistant, answered. Bob thought that was good as he could also learn from the right hand of the boss—if she was a good right hand.

"My name is Tom Jefferson," Bob said, grinning because he hadn't thought of a name other than that of the third president of the USA.

"I read about the... about the mishap of your insurance company in the paper. I'm a representative for Safer Security Limited—a company that could supply you with a replacement for your destroyed safe."

Bob had gone to great lengths to lower his voice a little and to talk in the way that so-called sales representatives tend to talk. Anyway, he had some sales experience at Sax Sendler's shop.

The assistant was indignant. It seemed that Safer Security Limited had already contacted them with an offer. A certain Mr Ashley had spoken with Mr Allison and arranged to send

one of their senior staff member there. "This gentleman's name wasn't Jefferson," the receptionist said.

She apparently didn't like it when a company's left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. But Bob didn't hear that pointy remark. He had hung up and was now piling up CDs.

Downstairs, he was in a great hurry to arrange the CDs on the shelves. Sax watched him, and when Bob was finished after half an hour and said goodbye, Sax put his hand on his shoulder and said: "Take care, Mr Jefferson. See you tomorrow."

Bob bent over the handlebar of his bike and decided not to think about people eavesdropping on others. He arrived at the salvage yard almost at the same moment as Al Hamilton. He looked pretty grumpy and wanted his blue Ford back.

"Of course," Jupiter said. "It's your car, after all." Out of his trousers pocket he laboriously pulled the car key out and clenched it in his fist. Al looked at him worriedly. He seemed to be expecting trouble.

"I need the third name," Jupiter said.

"What third name?" Al asked.

"Don't be so stupid," Bob said in between. "We want the name of the guy who wanted to torch our trailer with you and that alleged Phil Jordan."

"Larry."

"All right. Larry who?" Jupe asked.

"I don't know his last name." Al looked openly at the two of them. "I only saw him the second time that night. He's a friend of Phil's. Really, you can believe me."

"Who's the leader of you three?" Jupiter asked. "Is he the one who spoke a lot about teaching us a lesson and all that?"

Al Hamilton looked down. "Yes," he finally said quietly, "That was Phil."

"How did you get to work with those two?" Jupe continued the interrogation.

"Arthur Hayles arranged it," Al replied without hesitation.

"Okay," Jupiter said. "Come with me. We're going to your father's."

Al wanted to resist, but then he bowed to his fate. To be on the safe side, Bob took the wheel. After a few miles, Al Hamilton asked the two of them to promise that they would not denigrate him in front of his father.

"How did you know we were in contact with Lys de Kerk?" Jupiter tried an experiment. It succeeded.

"Why?" Al said. But his amazement did not sound very convincing.

"This man, who wants us to keep our hands off certain things, also knows that I am a friend of Lys de Kerk. And how does this Mr Arthur Hayles know that? From you?" Jupiter spoke loudly and very firmly. "After all, you're a private detective, aren't you?" he added mockingly. "It didn't take you much trouble to figure out that Lys is a friend of mine. And was that what you told Hayles?"

Al refused to disagree.

When they came into the drug store, old Hamilton seemed to feel a sense of joy to finally see his son again. Jerry Hamilton was sitting behind the counter and just had some kind of snack with bread, corned beef and a bottle of beer. With a growl, he offered to eat with Alex. He paid no attention to his companions.

"We don't want to disturb you for long," Jupiter said, fighting down the hunger that came to him at the sight of the crappy meal. "We just want to know what you know about Mr Arthur Hayles."

"Why should I tell you that?" Jerry Hamilton stared blankly at Jupiter.



“Come on, Dad, do me a favour and tell them.” It turned out to be very useful that they had Al with them.

His father continued to eat and told the story of a school friend who had emigrated to Europe. And a few months ago, he was back in Ventura. He must have gotten quite rich in Europe.

“He wears expensive clothes and drives a big Mercedes,” Jerry Hamilton said. The envy in his voice was unmistakable. He would have loved to change roles with Arthur Hayles.

“Why did he come to you?” Bob wanted to know.

“I don’t know.” Hamilton chewed clumsily. “And now it’s enough with the questions. Are you playing Humphrey Bogart or what?”

Jupiter and Bob nodded encouragingly at Al and said goodbye. On the way to the bus stop, at a phone booth, Bob called Pete and told him what had happened.

The bus driver turned out to be extremely spirited. He roared across the coast road like the devil was after him. The older people held on to the handholds rather frantically, while a few kids at the back of the bus enjoyed it.

At a left turn, Jupiter, who until then had been able to keep his balance, banged his head against the window. It hurt like hell, but he didn’t show it. “Maybe we can pull Al to our side,” he said a little abruptly. Bob looked at him in surprise. “So far, he’s our best ally.” Jupiter had already forgotten about the bruises on his arms. “Maybe because Hayles made him some great promises and did not keep them—money, for example. I’m sure Al could use some money.”

“One thing is as clear as daylight,” Bob said when the bus took the next right turn. “We’re going nowhere unless we find out what this Hayles has to do with Safer Security and Ashley.”

“You said it,” said Jupiter, rubbing as inconspicuously as possible the spot on his head where a small bump began to form.

Pete was already waiting at Headquarters. Of the three, Jupiter had the best relations with Chief Reynolds, so he called him.

It was pretty late in the evening. Reynolds was still at his desk. Four minutes later Jupiter had a piece of paper listing all the companies in the Los Angeles area that had safes cracked in the last ten years. There were twelve.

“Tomorrow I’ll call them in turn,” Jupiter said. “Bob’s idea of checking with the insurance company led us now know that Silver Hair had offered to replace their safe. This got me thinking of something.”

“Me too.” Bob grinned.

“Don’t be so brazen,” Pete said. “I guess it wasn’t so hard to figure it out.”

“That’s right. But you wouldn’t have bothered if you’d had the idea earlier,” Bob snapped back.

Pete wondered whether he should be offended, but then decided to make do with a dismissive gesture.

“Well, to cut a long story short,” Bob said. “There’s a suspicion that the safes are being cracked so that Silver Hair can sell his own safes.”

Pete nodded. “A very unconventional way to increase sales. But still, we can’t get past this weird theory.”

“Slowly, slowly,” Jupiter objected. “If the theory is true at all, we still can’t throw the baby out with the bath water. Firstly, this does not have to be so in all twelve cases. And secondly, we don’t know what role Silver Hair plays in this.”

“You mean he might have no idea why the safes were cracked? And yet the next day he is already on spot with an offer,” Pete thought. “That’s very unlikely.”

“Doesn’t sound very plausible,” Jupiter admitted. “But you can’t rule it out.”

Bob got up and did some squats. The two counted for him. “You’d better join in, I can count myself,” he cried. Pete joined in, and even Jupiter let his butt fall on his heels a few times.

But already at the eighth squat, he noticed that his breath was running out. He had to do something, he thought, eating less is not enough. He moaned and sat down on his chair again.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.” Pete and Bob didn’t seem to notice the effort at all. Enviously, Jupiter watched them. Pete couldn’t get enough. He connected a dozen more squats and jumped up again as if all this was nothing. “All right,” he said, “anyway, now we finally have a theory. So what now?”

“But even if this theory is confirmed tomorrow morning, and Safer Security Limited has in fact replaced most of the safes to the robbed companies—of course, nothing has been proven yet.”

Jupiter had rolled up his shirt sleeves and looked devoutly at the bruises on his arms, which now shimmered in the colours of the rainbow.

“This looks terrible,” Pete said sympathetically. And Bob gave Jupiter an encouraging pat on the back of the head.

“And what this Hayles has to do with the whole story is still unclear,” Jupiter stated.

They talked about the case for a while without coming to a solution. But they agreed that the key was Silver Hair and what Arthur Hayles wanted with the yellow paintings.

“If you ask me,” Pete finally said, “I have an idea.”

“Again? Gradually you’re getting scary,” Jupiter frothed, but Pete did not let himself be put off.

“If we want to take a closer look at Silver Hair, there are two possibilities. One is the company, but it’s guaranteed to be very secured. And the second is his house in the bay he told Uncle Titus and me about.” Pete went to the shelf right behind the desk and fished out a map. “I’ve already checked this out on a map at home. Look at this.” He dropped to his knees and unfolded the plan on the floor. “And guess what I found there. Thirty miles northwest of Los Angeles, a lonely house at a bay where the road recedes into the country because of the cliffs. It can only be here—Jalama.” Pete triumphantly tapped on a spot directly by the sea. “And if you look sharply, you can even spot the markings for a detached house.”

Bob had also bent over the map. “Could be.” He pointed to the bay. “El Capitano—right behind Cap Conception. That suits Silver Hair.” He looked at the other two. “How about a boat ride?”

Pete just said, “When?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Jupiter decided without hesitation. “Uncle Titus is expecting some results. I’ll reserve a boat for us at the nearest rental company. Departure from here at noon, I suggest.” He looked at his watch and cleared his throat slightly embarrassed. “And now I have another appointment.”

Bob and Pete had understanding looks at each other. “We’re already gone,” Bob shouted and ran across the salvage yard with Pete.

That evening, Jupiter watched a movie with Lys, but both of them didn’t notice too much about the story. It was a science fiction love story full of clichés in which Lys was originally supposed to play the heroine’s sister. But after she had read the script, she opted out although the producer tried to lure her back with a handsome fee. Jupiter thought it was great and was

proud of his girlfriend. Now that they could see the finished movie, it was already clear after fifteen minutes that it was a bad flick.

“I wouldn’t have saved him,” Lys snapped and took one last chocolate from the box. “You better tell me what’s new in your case.” She snuggled up to Jupiter’s side, and he was glad that nobody could see them in the dark cinema.

“It’s pretty complicated,” he said and started talking. Finally he arrived at their decision to make an unannounced visit to Silver Hair’s house tomorrow, by a boat trip along the coast.

“What do you think of that?” Jupiter asked and secretly hoped she would ask what it would be like if she went along.

But she didn’t answer. Lys de Kerk had fallen asleep.

Jupiter consoled himself with the sight of her beautiful face on his shoulder and the long blonde hair on his sweater, which he had bought especially for this rendezvous.

## 12. Detectives Overboard

When they got to the boat rental company, they found out that the boat that they rented was not there. The company's employee, a pimply fat boy who, for some unknown reason, wore a string of flowers around his belly like a Hawaiian girl, had another boat for The Three Investigators. But the price he wanted was \$12 higher than agreed.

"We can't let our mission fail because of this," Bob said. He took out his wallet and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Here's a donation for a good cause. Sax Sendler has been very generous lately."

Jupiter gave his friend an appreciative look. While he was paying, he was already wondering how they could return a favour to the greedy rental company. But he couldn't think of anything.

A bigger disaster was looming when they had placed two hundred metres between themselves and the jetty. Bob and Pete were just beginning to enjoy the rowing. It had been more than a year since they had last sat in such a boat, but they had not forgotten anything. Jupiter, who fulfilled the task of the helmsman badly, once again envied the two of them for their strength. If they went on like this, they'd make the few miles to the bay in an hour.

Bob was the first to see the dark clouds. "Turn around," he shouted to Jupiter.

A grey wall turning blue-black, crept up the horizon. It was only at that moment that Jupiter realized that he hadn't checked the weather forecast. It had been blowing pretty strong all day, but no raindrop had fallen, so no one had asked whether the weather gods were sympathetic to The Three Investigators. Bob and Pete rowed with all their might.

"Take it easy!" Jupiter shouted, "but hurry up."

After a few minutes, he looked back over his shoulder and gained hope. It looked as if the wall had stayed flat above the horizon. Of course, they could have turned back. But now that they've come this far? However, if the storm came, they would not be able to reach the shore. From here to the bay, the rocks were already too steep.

Soon Jupiter didn't have to turn around anymore. From the faces of his two friends, he could read what was happening behind him. The waves slowly became higher and the whitecaps more and more. It wasn't just the water splashes soaking their T-shirts and jeans jackets.

They were sweating as they had been for a long time. "We're not gonna make it!" screamed Bob.

After an hour the wall stretched over half the sky. Now it was just blue-black. And the wind became a storm that sometimes leapt from the sea and sometimes from the coast towards the rowing boat—like a cat striking its prey with a paw. The waves, which had rippled harmlessly at the boat earlier, were now rushing in.

"We have to make it!" Jupiter yelled. He pointed with his arm forward, past his friends to the rocky ledge that jutted into the sea some two hundred metres ahead. Of course, Jupiter had no idea what to expect next.

Yet he put his hands on his mouth like a funnel. "There's the Cap!" he yelled. "Behind it comes the bay!"

Bob and Pete understood. They believed him. If Jupe said El Capitano so close, then it was close. Just then, a mighty flash of lightning struck far behind Jupe with a thousand garish lines across the sky and into the sea.

Bob felt that his strength were dwindling. For a moment, his arms dropped. It's a good thing Pete couldn't see that in front of him. "Not so close to the rocks!" Bob yelled to Jupiter. They were pretty close to the reef now. If there's a bay behind it, Jupiter thought desperately, I'll start jogging tomorrow. Good heavens, let the bay be behind it!

Bob was the first to see the breaker. Almost apathetically he had watched the hill as it gradually built itself up outside on the foaming water and rolled closer and closer. Initially, he did not understand the danger, but when he did, it was too late, but there was nothing they could have done anyway.

Pete was sweat-drenched and rowing with his eyes half closed. "Hey!" he shouted, but the wave was already above them.

They were lifted up. The wave turned the boat around and dropped it like an annoying toy. As light as feathers, first Jupe, then Bob and Pete were thrown overboard.

Pete felt a thud when his head collided with the hull of the boat. Later he assumed that only the shock of the cold water had prevented him from becoming unconscious. Somehow he reappeared. His pants and jacket pulled on him like lead. The dark wall in the sky seemed to come down very low. A few metres from him, Jupiter and Bob made ridiculous contortions to keep their heads above water. The next wave pressed Pete's head under water again, and when he came up this time, he saw Jupiter clinging to the keel-up floating boat.

"I can do that too," Pete thought. "I'd have to pull myself together." Eight, ten powerful swim strokes. It was easier than he thought. The current pushed him in the right direction. When he struck and hastily reached for the edge of the boat under water, he heard a shrill cry behind him.

It was Bob. Ten metres away, he was drifting in the waves. His mouth was wide open, the left hand seemed to reach for the boat. The next wave seized him, and hurled him on.

Pete let go of the edge of the boat and threw himself towards Bob. Hardly more than a hundred metres further, the reef jutted out from the sea. A giant lightning hung its net in the dark sky as it struck into the rocks. The next instant, thunder crashed so violently over the bay that Pete thought his head was shattering.

Bob was losing energy. He spat and fought with all the water he had swallowed. Pete reached and grabbed him but was dragged down by Bob's weight.

Suddenly under his feet, Pete felt sand.

"I can stand!" Pete yelled and opened his eyes. Bob was pale as a sheet.

The Three Investigators found themselves on the shore, laid there almost dead. When they regained their senses and recovered reasonably well, they wondered how long they had been on the shore. Pete thought it was for a few minutes. Jupiter, who had survived the adventure most leniently, argued that it could not have been more than ten or fifteen minutes. Bob, who suffered the most out there, felt that it was more like eternity. It was as if the forces of nature were targeting The Three Investigators in particular.

However, they were content with the boat. Immediately after capsizing, it had probably saved the lives of the three boys. But then it suddenly disappeared, as if swallowed by the angry ocean. That's not how Jupiter imagined getting revenge on that fat boy.

Anyway, at some point, they scrambled to their feet and looked around. Jupe found his backpack a few metres away. Bob and Pete probably lost theirs in the water during the

struggle. Jupe felt a bit relieved as he had a waterproof bag with a spare set of clothes in his backpack. Bob and Pete probably had to make do with what they had on.

Jupe felt like a stranded alcohol smuggler during Prohibition. In many of these bays, there had been bloody battles between the police and seamen. Many ships were stranded in the storm. In some places wreckages could still be found today.

“A pot of hot grog wouldn’t be bad now,” Jupiter said as they staggered towards the house.

“You and alcohol, that’s new.” Pete had almost found his good mood again. The gusty wind carried his words away.

### 13. An Angel with a Revolver

The house stood right on the top of the bay and was built on a rock so the tide could not harm it. The bright white of its walls was attractive from afar.

They crawled more than they walked up the stone stairs that led from the sandy beach up to the house. Pete's knees were soft and his hands trembled. Nevertheless, he and his lock picks, who had survived the water in his waistband, needed hardly more than a minute to open a door.

They quickly checked both storeys of the house and concluded that no one else was there.

Whoever built this house did it very generously. The living room, with its large windows facing the sea, seemed huge. The interior was Spartan. In the middle was an extremely spacious sofa, a table and three wicker chairs and an easel at the largest window.

"What are we gonna do now?" asked Pete.

"Well, we lost our boat and there is no way we can make it back today," Jupe replied. "Since we are here, we might as well take a closer look at what Silver Hair has. But first, I suggest we freshen up. We can't do much with our wet clothes. Hopefully no one turns up, else we would be in big trouble."

The kitchen was thrifty. After all, there was enough mineral water and orange juice in the fridge to fight the salty taste of the sea water that the three had consumed involuntarily. Bob also found a bottle of gin, which he held out to Jupe. But he'd rather stay with orange juice.

In the corner, Pete discovered an old stove heater, which was already filled with paper, wood and coal, waiting to be put into operation. They undressed to their skin and hung their shoes and washed wet clothes over two chairs, and moved them close to the stove heater. Through the spiral staircase they climbed up to the first floor, went into the bathroom and took a shower. Jupe was the first to finish, disappeared and came back donned his spare set of clothing. Bob and Pete came back wrapped in towels which they took from the closet.

As if by mockery, the weather suddenly got better. The wind calmed down and a lime green strip of cloudless sky slowly rose above the sea. Far out on the horizon, even the first rays of the setting sun could be seen, but was still hiding behind the storm wall.

"Silver Hair would be surprised if he caught us here," Pete sneered. Bob let himself fall lengthways onto the sofa. He had very red eyes from the salt water. "I'm totally out," he moaned.

"What?" Jupe remarked. Although he would want them to investigate the house, The Three Investigators were still out at sea with their thoughts of how they narrowly escaped.

"We must not rely on it," Jupiter said sometime into the silence, "that there is always a flock of guardian angels flying around us." Then they kept quiet again.

"Come on, guys, we're not here to lounge around," Pete suddenly called out. "Let's take a look around, shall we?"

Bob stretched himself, yawning on the sofa. When Pete shouted "Get to work!" he just waved tiredly.

Even Jupiter remained seated. "I have a funny feeling in my stomach," he said. "This is a private house. With what right are we actually here, and with what right do we now want to start opening cupboards and drawers and spy around?"

Bob and Pete stared at him in amazement.

“Well, I’m enjoying it,” Bob yawned. “First we row up here and almost drown, and then you realize we can’t do that.”

Pete just shook his head silently. But he sat down on the sofa again.

“Am I right or wrong?” Jupiter drilled. “Of course, we’ve often gotten in somewhere before... but almost always only in offices, factory buildings or sheds. It was always kind of anonymous. Apartments were the exception. And we only did that when it was absolutely necessary, for example, when we already knew that people were guilty and the last evidence was missing.” He looked at his friends. “And here we are, just like that, on a vague suspicion that there may be something here to help us move forward.”

Bob and Pete had listened attentively.

“Am I right or not?” Jupe asked.

Pete was the first to reply. “Well, that’s right.” He got up, went towards the stove heater and touched his things. “First, you could’ve gotten your concerns a little bit earlier. Second, our clothes are still pretty wet. And third, I don’t know how we are getting out of here. We don’t have a boat now.”

Bob was still curled up on the sofa. “I have to think,” he said as he pulled himself together, “and for that, I need a drink. When I come back, I’ll know what’s right.” The other two decided to follow Bob into the kitchen.

They finished up what was left of the orange juice in the refrigerator. Jupe and Pete were talking as Bob decided to go back to the living room. He reached the sofa and stopped as he the sound of a key being inserted into the front door and it opened. Then, from the kitchen, Jupe and Pete heard Bob say “Oh!” and see him take two steps back and raised his left arm and then his right.

“Come on, move it,” said a bright voice. “But nice and slow.”

It looked like a silent movie, with a slow-motion. Jupe and Pete stared out from the kitchen with their mouths open. At the doorway appeared an angelic creature with long blond hair in a white morning coat. The black revolver, which she held in her right hand and aiming at Bob, did not fit her appearance at all. Jupe and Pete went to the kitchen door.

The angel took a look around the living room. “If you want to stay healthy, then do as I say. Don’t move!”

All due respect, Jupiter thought, she’s got nerve. Her voice sounded absolutely calm.

“You can go to the sofa now...” she said and gave Bob a little nudge with the barrel of the gun. “Well, go ahead. You two over there as well.” She pointed at Jupe and Pete.

Bob plopped down on the couch, followed by Jupe and Pete.

“You can put your hands down now,” said the young woman. She sat in an armchair a few yards from The Three Investigators. She didn’t let the boys out of her sight for a second.

“May I ask what you’re doing here?” She looked at the three coolly.

“We almost drowned,” said Bob. It sounded reproachful, as if the angel herself had thrown them into the Pacific.

“Very well.” The woman threw her hair back with an energetic jerk. “You’ve survived, I see. But I want to know what you’re doing in this house.”

Bob and Pete gave Jupe inviting glances. You’re the First Investigator, those looks said, you should bail us out. Jupe sat there pinching his lower lip.

“What is it?” She was shaking the gun impatiently. “Have you lost your tongue? First you break in, then you’re speechless. You are beautiful heroes to me.”

“And who are you, if I may ask?” Pete intervened because her tone annoyed him.



“You’ve got half a minute to answer me, else I’ll call the police.” The angel sat stiffly in her chair.

Jupiter thought her expression was getting more and more ungracious. He ran his hand through his hair and took a deep breath once. Then he made a full confession.

From the first moment, he had confidence in the young woman. The fact that she is alone, with only one weapon in her hand, stood in the way of the three strong boys. Jupiter thought, perhaps he could get her to be an ally, as there were too few of that in this case.

Quite unnoticed, Jupiter did not mention certain events that had to do with cracked safes in his confession. He concentrated entirely on the mission they had received from Uncle Titus and on their efforts to get behind the mystery of the yellow painting. “And that’s why we’re here.” He was done and looked at the angel.

“All right,” the young woman replied coolly. “So when you hear someone painting pictures, you just go into his studio. Have you ever heard of privacy? Or does that not apply if you are Sherlock Holmes?”

Bob and Pete collapsed a bit. Then Pete leaned forward. “Let me try,” he whispered in Jupiter’s ear. He thought he had two big trump cards up his sleeve and wanted to play the first one now. “Mr William Ashley doesn’t just paint strange pictures. He’s also the head of Safer Security Limited. A number of safes have been cracked in and around Los Angeles in recent years. Most of all, of course, because the burglars wanted the contents of the safes.”

It did not escape The Three Investigators that the woman blushed a little and her eyelashes twitched. Pete felt that he was getting an upper hand. Without asking for permission, he got up and started pacing up and down the living room. He had folded his hands behind his back, as he learned from his mathematics teacher, Don Colby.

“And secondly, orders was secured for the company,” Pete said as coolly as possible. “The replacement safes, you understand?” She sat there like a statue. Pete had hit the mark. “A somewhat fancy way of competing with other suppliers, don’t you think?”

Jupiter listened in amazement at his friend. They didn’t expect Pete to be so convincing and logical.

“So there’s a suspicion that Mr William Ashley knows about these criminal activities. And that he might even be the mastermind.” Pete stopped in front of the angel.

The young woman forgot to point the gun at him. She looked up at him and blushed again.

“May I ask you a question?” Pete said politely. He stood right in front of her and leaned down. “You’re William Ashley’s daughter, aren’t you?”

She threw her hair into her neck again, but it didn’t look so energetic anymore.

There was just so much in the fridge, enough to provide a poor dinner for four people. Stella Ashley and Jupiter cooked, the other two laid the table.

“You may call me Stella,” Stella said. Jupe enjoyed sizzling on the stove with her—not only because of her long blond hair which reminded him of Lys.

During the meal they tried from time to time to get something out of Stella. That didn’t work. She was nice, but silent when it came to her father and his business. “You must understand...” she began a few times. What The Three Investigators were supposed to understand, however, she kept to herself. Soon after dinner she retired. Before that she allowed her guests to stay the night, and Jupe was allowed to call Uncle Titus and tell him that he wouldn’t return home in the evening.

“Guess who’s here right now,” Uncle Titus trumpeted.

“No idea. I’m not a psychic, Uncle,” Jupiter said.

“Alex Hamilton.”

“Oh, and what does he want?” Jupiter replied, surprised.

“He can tell you himself.” He heard Uncle Titus calling Al.

“I just wanted to say Hayles called again this morning,” Al said. He sounded really eager.

“And? What did he say?”

“Before he could say anything, I asked a question.”

“Aha, and what was it?”

“What he has got to do with Safer Security Limited.”

Jupiter wondered whether Al Hamilton had been clever or stupid. He came to the conclusion that it couldn’t do any harm. It was certain that he got straight into the matter.

“And? What did he say?”

“Nothing at all. Except that I shouldn’t bother about things that do not concern me.”

“How exactly did he say that?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“As what I said, and that I should keep my hands off it.”

Stella was already in bed. Otherwise he would have asked her if she knew a certain Arthur Hayles—that’s the name Jupiter left out of his confession.

## 14. Things Get Rolling

That night, The Three Investigators slept like logs. The next morning, Stella had disappeared. They wondered why she didn't show up for breakfast. Jupiter went upstairs and found the bedroom empty.

In the kitchen cupboard Pete discovered two huge bags of corn flakes. There was also plenty of milk, but it didn't really taste that good. Nevertheless, they decided to leave ten dollars there. Anyway, they felt like invaders. Now they had even driven Stella out of her father's house.

"Of course she's off to warn her father about us. She probably would advise him to settle abroad." Bob, lost in thought, stirred the milk into the corn flakes. "She couldn't call from here because the phone is downstairs in the living room and we would have heard."

Jupiter went upstairs again to make sure that there was no phone extension there.

"You're probably right," Jupiter turned to Bob.

"However, we do not know if she has reached him. He's the boss and must be on the road a lot. But we can find out right now." He picked up the phone, dialled the number of Safer Security Limited, introduced himself as Mr Vanderbilt and learned that Mr Ashley was not expected back from a business trip until the afternoon.

"And how did she get away from here?" Pete thought out loud. "I haven't seen a second boat anywhere."

"On foot, of course, up to the coastal road. Just like we're going to do now," Jupiter said. He was already up and running again.

After breakfast, Jupiter spread out his map on the living room table. They agreed on a path that first led from the house to the small town of Jalama and then to the main road towards Las Cruces. Jupiter looked at the clock. "It's a little past nine now. It should be two miles to Jalama. Worst-case scenario, we'll need an hour and a half."

Pete already got himself into shape with squats, and shadow boxes. "Provided, of course, you don't collapse."

"Thank you for your sympathy. I'm all right now," replied Jupiter.

Bob sounded a little timid. He couldn't digest yesterday's knockout so quickly. "I have an idea," he suggested. "How about we call Worthington?"

Jupiter patted him on the back with encouragement and once again congratulated himself on winning a contest sponsored by the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Company a few years ago. The prize was the free use of a Rolls-Royce for thirty days. With the car had come Worthington, an English chauffeur. The thirty-day prize period had long expired. Fortunately, after they had solved one of their most spectacular cases, the grateful client had arranged for rental of the Rolls whenever the investigators needed transportation. However, after the investigators obtained their driver's licences, they only used this Rolls privilege when it was absolutely necessary. Today it was more necessary than ever.

They were lucky. Worthington was available to handle their request. Jupiter told him where Jalama was. With some time in hand, they proceeded to clean up the mess that they made. Guilty conscience went so far that Jupiter took out the vacuum cleaner and didn't even leave out any corners. Finally, they closed the front door behind them.

“This can’t be happening.” Pete was the first to see another mess in front. On the horizon another black storm wall has already mounted—even blacker and more menacing than yesterday.

“We can’t go back,” Jupiter said darkly, when he saw that Pete was pulling out his lock pick again. “Worthington has left. We can’t keep him waiting. We also have an appointment in Los Angeles.”

“So let’s go,” Pete shouted and stowed the lock pick in his waistband. “The sooner the better.” He stormed down the stone stairs. They no longer appreciated the sea after what had befallen them yesterday. All the more impressive was the rugged coastal landscape of the Pacific Ocean in front of them. Pete stopped and stretched out his arm. “Look, up there! You can see the roof of a moving truck.”

It was the grey tarpaulin of a truck, moving at high speed through the mountains. So this was the road to Jalama. It was very far away and depressingly high up. It had all looked much friendlier on the map. Two hundred metres behind the house, the ascent began.

According to the map, they had to keep right to come to a path that ran in turns through the rocks. In their still-wet sneakers, the three felt every stone on the floor. After three hundred metres the first raindrops fell. At the same time the mild breeze that was blowing, began to blow more violently.

So we get wet to the bone again, Bob thought. He started thinking of how high the probability was for three inhabitants of this area to get into a storm on two consecutive summer days. But he soon gave up. The inclines were so steep that he lost his breath. He went last.

At least they soon found what could be considered the path shown on the map. In some places high trees lined it, otherwise it led only through rock and boulders. Most of the time it wasn’t even a metre wide. But one could see that human hands had created it.

“Not so fast!” Bob heard himself calling. Sweat and raindrops ran from his forehead. Pete stopped for a moment and waited, but then went on. Even Jupe could barely keep up with him.

When Pete turned around a rock that had blocked him, a storm gust whipped a branch in his face. He staggered.

“What happened?” cried Jupiter, but Pete raised his arm and retreated behind the rocks until the other two reached him. He looked at his watch. They climbed for almost half an hour and had barely covered more than half a mile. He tried to find the road that was somewhere above, but it was out of sight.

Jupe and Bob were panting. Jupe imagined the next time he would stand in the kitchen with Lys and prepare a feast. That gave him strength. And Bob mobilized his last energy by imagining how he would soon get into Worthington’s Rolls-Royce.

It was now pattering down evenly. Again and again strong gusts of wind swept up from the bay.

“Five-minute break!” Jupiter suggested. The other two just nodded. A few metres above the path was a rock that hung over and it could provide a shelter from the rain. Over bare, smooth rock they climbed to the shelter and sat next to each other on the ground. From here there was a fantastic view of the coast and the rocks.

Far below them lay the sea, on which wave upon wave rolled to the shore. William Ashley’s house was still clearly visible.

“If, contrary to expectations, the sun should shine again in this area,” joked Pete, “you can definitely see as far as Japan from here.” Jupe and Bob smiled faintly.

Jupiter felt the cold creeping up inside him. “We have to move,” he cried and began to cross his arms. Bob followed suit. Pete sat there and didn’t move.

“Hey, you’ll catch a cold!” Jupiter gave his friend a gentle poke in the ribs. But he didn’t react. He stared down, spellbound. Jupiter followed his gaze.

Suddenly, in a distance, they saw two figures moving towards the house. They seemed to slide down the last few feet of the slope. They had to look closely in see more detail. One figure appeared light brown from top to bottom. Light brown—it shot Jupiter through the head.

The colour of camel hair!

“It’s not Silver Hair,” Pete murmured when he noticed that the second figure does not have snow-white hair that made William Ashley such an impressive apparition. Pete awoke from his numbness.

The two figures were not far from the front door and now stood out against the background of the bright white walls. Jupe pushed Bob in the ribs and pointed down. It took Bob some time to spot the two figures. He didn’t seem to care much about them.

“I believe,” Jupiter said slowly, “we have to change our plans.”

“I feel the same way,” Pete agreed.

The decision was made quickly. Pete and Bob was to go back to the bay. Jupiter would go on alone, up to meet Worthington. At least the weather god was understanding this time. In some places the sky ripped open, the cloudburst had turned into a gentle downpour, and the wind seemed to like it better inland.

“Take care of yourselves,” Jupiter warned. “Maybe those two down there are dangerous.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Pete replied. “Better make sure you don’t fall off the mountain.” It was supposed to sound funny, but Pete wasn’t thinking about leaving Jupiter alone now.

Jupe seemed to guess what the Second Investigator was thinking. “If Stella’s can do it, I think I can do too, don’t you?” He took a deep breath and set off.

Bob and Pete trotted downhill. At the foot of the mountain they took cover behind a cypress tree. They rested for a few minutes and Bob felt a little better now.

Pete figured that in their weakened state it would take them about thirty seconds to sprint to the house. “What do we do if they come out right now? I’m sure the camel-hair man will recognize us.”

They chose to run and got lucky. They passed the stairs and the front door and crept around the house. The door to the basement was no problem for Pete and his lock picks. The door creaked a little as they slipped in.

Through a small window pale light fell. They can tell that Ashley used this room in the basement as a storeroom for some old furniture, and as a wine cellar. A shelf full of bottles towered up to the ceiling.

They took off their wet jackets and quickly slipped out of the T-shirts to wring them out over a gully in the middle of the room. “Yucks,” Pete quietly cried as they put the wet clothes back on. They looked around.

Bob nudged Pete and pointed to a corner. There were two large paintings leaned next to each other. Both showed idyllic landscapes painted in various shades of yellow. The one on the right had been hanging in Aunt Mathilda’s living room a few days ago, even if it was for a few hours.

Everything was quiet upstairs. Hopefully, Pete thought, these two were warming up at the stove heater. He pulled Bob’s sleeve and pointed to the door, behind which there had to be another room.

Bob nodded and put his finger on his lips.

Jupiter hadn't enjoyed the sight of the Rolls-Royce so much in a long time. The heating was turned on, and Worthington had two blankets ready. With the first, Jupiter massaged himself dry, with the second, he wrapped himself tightly. It had taken him almost an hour to get to the coastal road. He finally swore to do more for his fitness. But now it was done.

Almost silently, the car glided along State Route 1. After Santa Barbara, traffic got heavier and heavier. Jupiter lay in the comfortable back seats and enjoyed the view of the coast. And he rejoiced in the sun that bathed him in bright light.

"It was great that you came so quickly," Jupiter thanked Worthington for the third time. He smiled at the boy through the rearview mirror.

"And where do you want to go?"

"To Los Angeles, please," Jupiter said. A few minutes later he nodded off.

At the outskirts of city, Worthington woke him. Jupiter took off the blanket. He directed the chauffeur towards Safer Security Limited.

"Is it dangerous?" Worthington asked when they arrived at their destination.

"Dangerous? I don't think so." Jupiter had a good feeling.

But to be sure, he said: "If I'm not back in an hour, call Chief Reynolds, okay?"

Worthington steered through the gate into the company's courtyard.

## 15. Listening from the Basement

Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews would have lied if they had pretended to be art connoisseurs. But as far as modern painting was concerned, both were not entirely unaware. Bob in particular was a regular visitor to art exhibitions in Los Angeles. Once he had also dragged Jupe and Pete to the Orange County Center, a non-profit gallery dedicated to contemporary art that made young artists famous. Bob's profession was actually music, but he was also interested in painters, sculptors and photographers. A year ago, during a visit to New York, he had spent almost an entire day in the photography department of MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art.

Unlike the MOMA, the exhibition they saw in the basement of William Ashley's house was for free. There were also only about sixty square metres housing the exhibits. The paintings were hung on or leaned against the walls, laid on tables, and kept in drawers. It had to be hundreds of pictures—watercolours, graphics, etchings, abstract colour paintings and economical ink drawings. Bob and Pete were speechless. They wandered back and forth between works, almost forgetting why they were here.

"That's the work of a master, not just an apprentice," Bob whispered.

Pete nodded. "An unrecognized genius," he said quietly. Then he pointed his hand upwards.

Unclear voices were heard. Pete took Bob with him to the end of the room where the stairs leading up to the ground floor were.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Pete gently pushed down the cellar door handle. Through a small gap, he looked outside. There was a narrow corridor behind the door. Further back a section of the living room could be seen, with the stove heater and a part of the window front with a view of the sea. They heard footsteps and noises, but they sounded so far away that they could only come from the first floor.

"I'll find it if I have to turn the whole house upside down," shouted a voice. It sounded hard and unpleasant, and Bob immediately remembered what Lys had said about the caller —'like a creep at the movies'. Then there was silence again, except for the footsteps and noises. Once it sounded like a full drawer had crashed on the floor.

"Imagine that we spent so long cleaning up the place," Pete whispered.

"I don't know," someone said at that moment. "As far as I'm aware, Mr Ashley doesn't appreciate such disorder."

"The man in the camel-hair coat," Bob whispered. Gradually he became uncomfortable. What happened here was undoubtedly a house search by people who obviously had much less scruples than The Three Investigators. It was only a matter of time before it was extended to the basement.

"Mr Ashley, Mr Ashley!" hissed the first voice. "You need to finally figure out what you want, man! If you'd like to continue playing the valet, please... but then you're in the wrong place. Or do you finally want to get what you deserve?"

The camel-hair man did not answer.

"There's nothing up here," said the first voice again.

Now Bob and Pete could hear footsteps on wood. Obviously, the two of them came down the spiral staircase to the living room.

“Shall we go to the basement right away? Oh well, I’ll have some coffee first.” That was the same voice that broke out into an ugly laugh right after that. “I’m at home here, sort of. And you’re my guest, man.”

There was creaking of a wicker chair, followed by sounds from the kitchen. Bob and Pete looked at each other with relief. They still had a grace period in their hiding place behind the cellar door.

From the kitchen came the rattling of an espresso machine.

“You’ve got to stop thinking about Mr Ashley. Mr Ashley is only human,” followed by the ugly short laugh again. “I know him. I’ve known him for over fifty years.”

The camel-hair man remained silent. But Pete thought he could hear a soft sigh.

“And by the way, your Mr Ashley belongs in prison,” said the first voice. “Isn’t that right? You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” replied the camel-hair man with a sigh. “All of us.”

“Well, well,” came the voice again with the moaning laughter. “We don’t want to get sentimental, do we?”

Now the two investigators heard footsteps approaching and cups set down on the living room table.

“By the way, man, one thing is clear to you: Even if I don’t find anything here, it means nothing to me. I’ll then tell him about the burglaries,” said the first voice.

“You need proof of that,” the camel-hair man replied.

“Proof, proof! I don’t need proof when I have witnesses.” The voice sounded more and more agitated.

For a few seconds, everything was silent. “Witnesses? Are you talking about me?” the camel-hair man said.

“Who else? You and that naïve Jerry Hamilton. What better witnesses are there than those who have seen it—” The man broke off followed by a lengthy silence.

Bob and Pete nudged each other. So old Hamilton was a lot more involved than they thought.

“That’s against the agreement.” The otherwise pleasant, soft voice of the camel-hair man now sounded very rough and anxious, like from someone who suddenly found himself in a deep fix.

“Agreement! Agreement!” The man roared so loud that Bob and Pete flinched. “I never promised you anything. No way! I don’t make any promises! And besides, everyone’s got to take care of themselves. Understand?” The one-sided dialogue continued from the kitchen at an increased volume. “And who came up with the whole idea, huh?”

The boys listened with bated breath. Pete would have liked to have shouted to the two of them that they should finally speak plainly.

The creep continued on, and the camel-hair man remained extremely monosyllabic. At least it became clear that the creep saw Mr William Ashley as an enemy and the camel-hair man a weakling who simply couldn’t manage to face up to his boss. The whole thing sounded like the camel-hair man had cracked the safes and the creep knew about it and wanted to blackmail the boss of Safer Security Limited. Obviously Jerry Hamilton had been his accomplice.

Bob swallowed. He had believed the old Hamilton when he dished up the story of his school friend Arthur Hayles. That was the only connection Hamilton Senior had to the whole case, apart from giving his son tasks that he should not have accepted. But The Three



Investigators had always suspected that the old man knew nothing about what his son was doing. With this in hand, Bob and Pete continued to listen. They wished that they had some sort of a recording device with them, but now, they had to remember every detail of the conversation.

“Gee, we’re stupid!” Pete exclaimed in a suppressed voice that was quite loud. To make matters worse, he slapped his hand against his forehead.

“Are you crazy?” Bob hissed and closed the door. Pete looked at him guiltily. They stood behind her door and were convinced that the next moment it would open and the camel-hair man would appear. But nothing happened. Bob then gently reopened the door.

## 16. The Clue is Voltaire

At the same time, Jupe had a conversation that was no less exciting than the one Bob and Pete listened to on the landing at the basement door. However, he took an active part in it—much more active than Mr William Ashley might have liked.

The head of Safer Security Limited sat behind his desk facing a well-dressed young man who had introduced himself to Miss Clayburn as Jupiter Jones, a private investigator. He had demanded an immediate conversation with Mr Ashley on an extremely important matter.

As soon as Jupiter had taken his seat, he presented Mr Ashley with The Three Investigator's business card, which read:



Mr Ashley took a look at it, turned it around, and asked, "So what can I do for you?"

Jupiter came straight to the point. "There is a suspicion, Mr Ashley," he said, "that in a series of burglaries in recent years, not everything has been done as it should have been."

Silver Hair twitched slightly, but he immediately regained control. Jupiter admired him. Anyway, it was quite hard for him to believe that this noble and likeable-looking gentleman was a serial burglar.

"Well, young friend," Ashley said and smiled encouragingly at Jupiter. "Things are not right... is in the nature of burglaries."

One to nothing for you, Jupiter thought. But there were more points to bring out. "There were burglaries where safes have been cracked and replaced with ones from Safer Security Limited," Jupiter said. At this moment, he planned to take out his notepad and read from it. That seemed professional. But he had the clear feeling that with a man like Silver Hair, such tricks would not catch on. So he left the notepad where it was.

Jupiter continued: "Just a few days ago in Malibu, there was an insurance company called..."

"... California Life Insurance," Ashley finished the sentence for him.

"That's right," Jupiter said. He felt sorry for Ashley, whom he liked more and more by the second, but Jupiter also enjoyed the showdown with him. Although, at that moment, he thought it wasn't really a showdown. It's rather a cat-and-mouse game. I'm the cat, you're the mouse. And the question is not if I catch you, but when.

"None of these burglaries has been solved. The loot remained missing." Jupiter looked Ashley in the face. "There is a suspicion that the burglars were people associated with your company."

Ashley sat in his chair and did not move. The First Investigator did not take his eyes off him. And at the same time he realized that this dignified gentleman had certainly never cracked a safe nor ever been a lookout. He's someone, Jupiter thought, who lets the break-ins—perhaps it was done by the camel-hair man?

Silver Hair did not twist a face. "Who has this suspicion?" he wanted to know.

"Me. That is, us."

"Who's 'us'?"

"Our detective agency."

Ashley reached for the business card, looked at it again, shook his head softly and fell silent. Apparently, he didn't feel like getting more details about The Three Investigators. Instead, he rested his chin in his hand and seemed to think whether he should throw Jupiter out or continue this strange conversation.

Jupiter had often noticed a mistake with criminals in crime movies. When the commissioner claimed that they had murdered, cheated or otherwise done anything forbidden, these movie villains often did not respond in a way they would if they were innocent. Instead, they would say, "You have to prove that to me!" to the police every reason to drill harder. Silver Hair made the same mistake.

"Where's your evidence?" Ashley asked. Jupiter was surprised.

"Evidence?" Jupiter asked back. "Unfortunately, we do not have proof."

Ashley took note of this concession without a gesture of triumph.

He is really smart, Jupiter thought. He suspects that I have other things in my hand. He proceeded to enumerate: "We have an attempted burglary in the storeroom of the Jones Salvage Yard at Rocky Beach. In this storeroom was a painting of the way you paint." Jupiter pointed to the picture that graced the wall behind where Silver Hair was seated—the one with a herd of yellow calves in a yellow meadow. "We also had an anonymous caller asking our investigators not to pursue this painting. He also engaged thugs who attempted to set our office on fire because we didn't comply."

Silver Hair raised an eyebrow. Obviously he seemed to disapprove of such actions.

"We also have," Jupiter continued, "an employee of your company who bought the painting from the Jones Salvage Yard and brought it back here—probably on your behalf."

The First Investigator straightened up a little in his armchair, and continued: "We have a hunch that this employee is currently in your studio in El Capitano." For the first time Silver Hair showed some reaction, with a glimmer on this face. Jupiter noted it with satisfaction. "... And in the company of a second man. Apparently, they want to take advantage of your absence, for whatever reason."

Miss Clayburn wanted to put through a telephone call at that moment, but Ashley forbade any interference because he was in an important meeting. He's right, Jupiter said to himself.

Jupiter looked anxiously at Ashley. Would what he had said so far be enough to convince Ashley to give in? Or did he want to hear more?

"Is that all?" asked Silver Hair.

"No."

"You can tell me the rest in the car." Silver Hair pressed the call button when getting up. He had urgent business to do, he told Miss Clayburn, but he couldn't say when he would be back. He's right about that, too, Jupiter thought.

"Where are we going?"

"To the studio. Or are you afraid?" Silver Hair looked at him mockingly.

But Jupiter held his gaze. Not only that, he countered: "Not the trail. Two of my colleagues are already there." This time Ashley didn't respond.

Outside Jupiter had trouble keeping up with Ashley and at the same time inconspicuously signalling to Worthington that he no longer needed him. The chauffeur knew Jupiter well enough and understood immediately. In one corner, there was an old car. It turned out to be the Buick the camel-hair man took to Uncle Titus's salvage yard a week ago to buy the yellow painting.

Ashley started and drove in a sweeping arc across the yard and through the driveway.

"The last stretch we'll ride on my motorboat. I hope you don't mind."

"No," Jupiter said. "Not since yesterday."

Silver Hair looked at him in surprise, but asked nothing.

When they left the city limits of Los Angeles, Ashley wanted to hear again the name of the junk dealer who temporarily had his yellow painting.

"Titus Jones," Jupiter said.

"And what did you say your name was?"

"Jupiter Jones."

For a moment Jupiter feared that Silver Hair would stop and chase him out of the car. But Silver Hair, who was already driving very fast, pushed the accelerator a little lower and fell silent again.

"All right," he finally said. "Your family stories are not important to me. And now the rest, please."

Jupiter watched a coastal steamer far out in the sea, which seemed to have been standing still for quite some time. "You're right," he said. "Your family is much more interesting right now."

Just then, Silver Hair made a somewhat risky overtaking manoeuvre. Despite the 60 mph speed limit, the needle showed 75. On the lonely road through the mountains, Jupiter had had enough time to think about how to teach Ashley. It might sound arrogant, like he's bragging about his high school education, but he put his concerns aside.

Jupiter began: "The caller who threatened us was, as I said, anonymous. But he didn't go to much trouble to hide his identity. He used the name Arthur Hayles to give instructions to raid our office."

Jupiter took a short break. The coastal steamer out on the Pacific coast seemed to be finally move. He then said: "The clue is Voltaire."

Silver Hair turned his head around. This time he became pale and needed some time to regain his composure. "You know a lot, young man." He released a bit on the accelerator and asked nothing more.

Jupiter preferred it that way. Somehow it would have been embarrassing for him to confess to Silver Hair. He had rummaged in his library yesterday evening before going to bed and came across a book about a famous French writer who was actually called François-Marie Arouet. He used the adopted name Voltaire by jumbling the letters of the Latinized spelling of his surname—AROVET—and adding two more letters—LI. AROVET LI became VOLTAIRE. And this suddenly struck him hard.

"Your brother didn't have to add anything," he said. "Ashley and Hayles, that's not a coincidence."

"It's all right," grumbled Silver Hair.

One the left of the road, a small marina came into view. Here, the highway was very close to the Pacific. Silver Hair parked his car and got out. It was only a few steps to his motorboat. Jupe climbed in and looked up at the sky. It was bright blue and stretched over him as far as the eye could see.

Bob and Pete let themselves be deceived. The man with the ugly voice talked and talked, and it did not occur to them at all that he had suddenly become more conciliatory, but his voice had become more nervous.

“Hands up!” said a voice behind them very loudly. They turned around and saw the camel-hair man, whom they had believed to be sitting silently in the living room listening to the tirades of his strange partner. He looked grumpy and determined and held in his hand a thing that was much like a Browning. The two investigators obediently extended their arms towards the ceiling.

At the living room, the other’s rant stopped. The doorknob was rammed into Bob’s back. “Hey,” he protested and almost fell.

“Take it easy. Don’t move,” said the camel-hair man. Now they saw the other one behind them. He walked past and stood in front of them. His elegant grey suit with white shirt and tie in bright colours was fashionably the latest trend. A small gold chain dangled from the wrist. A typical nouveau riche, Bob thought, like out of a picture book.

He liked this face even less than the clothes, with his protruding chin and black eyebrows. In gangster movies, the semi-silky bosses of any gang looked like this.

“Don’t look at me like that!” the creep yapped. “What are you doing here? Who are you, anyway? How did you get here?”

Many questions at once. Pete and Bob blinked at each other and silently decided to leave them unanswered for the time being.

“How long have you been spying around here?” The stranger didn’t let up.

Bob and Pete remained silent. Even by giving truthful information, they would not improve their already bad situation. Not to be overlooked was the anger vein at the forehead of the man. “Do you know these guys?” The question went to the camel-hair man.

Despite with the weapon in his right hand, the camel-hair man, who was one head taller than creep, seemed a little helpless. Nevertheless, he had a surprise for the investigators. He shook his bald square skull and said: “Never seen them before.”

Of course he recognized me, Bob thought. Maybe he doesn’t immediately know where he’d seen me. But it will come to him soon. After all, it had only been a few days since Bob posed as a potential customer at Safer Security Limited. He had been nervous with lengthy speeches when he wanted to buy a safe for his father’s fiftieth birthday.

And Pete had the clear feeling that the camel-hair man remembered him very well as the companion of the kinky millionaire Hillary.

“Never seen them before,” their strange protector repeated in his pleasant voice.

“Do you know with whom we have the honour?” Pete said sarcastically without making a face.

“I don’t know,” Bob said cheekily. “I have other acquaintances.”

“Shut up!” hissed the creep.

“Where to with these two?” The camel-hair man stood there undecided.

The other guy had an idea. He took the Browning from his hand and pointed it into the hallway. “Come on, let’s go,” he said and drove Bob and Pete ahead till they reached a storeroom. He then pushed them in and locked the door from the outside.

“You smart asses can call me if you think of anything,” he shouted angrily.

Bob wanted to put on an ironic smile, but it turned into a grimace. “Well then,” Pete said as he sat down. Bob followed his lead, but it wasn’t very comfortable to sit on the ground and stare at the walls.

On the wall was an old art calendar and a poster from the Los Angeles Children’s Museum of Art. “That’s a great thing,” Bob said, somewhat absent-mindedly, pointing to the

crooked child's drawing. "I was there before—they teach kids to paint."

"Hmm," Pete hummed, and went cross-legged in a meditation pose.

But before he could sink into a trance, Bob asked: "Now I just want to know what realisation you had earlier. Why are we stupid?"

"Do you remember..." Pete replied, "what Lys said about the caller's voice?" He paused, then continued: "Tough, harsh, mean—as how he looks."

Bob rested his chin on his hand. "And then let's guess what our prison guard's name is."

"It's obvious," Pete replied. He had closed his eyes, as it should be in meditation exercises, and now rested his hands on his knees with the palms upwards. "Arthur Hayles."

"That's half the story at best," Bob said quietly. "What do you think of Burt Ashley?"

Pete postponed his meditation. He opened his eyes and stared at Bob. "And what makes you think of him, if I may ask?"

"It's just an idea. A pretty good one though. Just need to shake the letters 'Ashley' around," Bob replied.

Pete spelled the two names out and had to agree with Bob. "It would be a strange coincidence," he whispered.

"No coincidence, and this is not just a criminal case," Bob whispered back. "It is a family drama."

## 17. Family War

It was a lovely day. Only Silver Hair did not seem to perceive its beauty. Absorbed, he sat at the wheel and rode the waves. With his suit and tie, he looked out of place compared to most other motorboaters who crashed along the coast.

They passed the company of the well-fed boat renter, who had taken so much money from them yesterday for a rowing boat and knew nothing of the fact that he would never see it again. After a good half mile, Ashley suddenly turned the key around. The roaring sound of the engine died. The boat shot along for a short distance, then it went at a leisurely pace.

Silver Hair waved Jupiter towards him. "You're actually a private investigator, young man? Or is it just Mr Titus Jones's son?"

"Private investigator, sir. And nephew."

"All right. And the office of your, uh, business was to be burned down?"

"That's right, sir. I was attacked at night by three men. If my aunt Mathilda hadn't come out with the baseball bat—"

Jupiter left the sentence unfinished. "By the way, you know my uncle. I'm sure you remember a Mr Hillary from Rocky Beach, who was with you a few days ago."

"Of course. Along with a tall blond young man."

"A colleague of mine, sir."

"So the whole thing was a comedy." Silver Hair seemed to be pondering a little about this statement. But then he chased away his thoughts. "We don't have much time."

"How do you know that one of my employees is in my studio with someone else?"

"We were there ourselves, sir."

"Who are 'we'?"

"My two colleagues and I."

"Why?"

"We were looking for evidence."

"Against who?"

"Against you, sir."

"I understand," Ashley nodded as if he expected nothing less. He looked at the sea, pondering, then he gave himself a jolt again. "If you'd asked me earlier, you could have saved yourself the trip. You can't find anything there. There's no leads, no records, nothing."

"So what have you done with the loot?" Jupiter asked.

Silver Hair looked at Jupiter, worried. The boat rocked gently on the water. The sun shone down on Ashley's snow-white wreath of hair. Almost like a halo, Jupiter thought.

"Do you have any imagination, young man?"

"I hope so."

For the next five minutes, William Ashley talked about his life. From art, which was his passion and how he had to let it recede into the background because his father had demanded that his sons take over the company. It was a job he hated but had to pursue because his brother, whom he had never got along with, disappeared to Europe. He displayed contempt for people who flooded the world with safes and made it possible for every miser to store his valuables like in a shrine. He had this absurd idea, which one day completely dominated over

him, to crack safes, and give most of the loot to the Los Angeles Children's Museum. And also to replace the damaged safes with those from Safer Security Limited.

"Completely crazy," Ashley concluded. He avoided looking at Jupiter.

"That's right, sir," Jupiter said. "But it's got something."

Silver Hair started the engine again. A little later, Cap Conception appeared, and then El Capitano. The boat turned around the ledge, but Ashley made no effort to enter the bay behind it. Instead, with the house on the left he headed southeast past it, towards a small sandy beach surrounded by large boulders.

Jupiter helped Silver Hair pull the boat ashore.

"Come with me, young man," he said and took his step forward. They climbed some rocks, walked around a few large boulders and suddenly stood in front of the entrance of a cave. "I have nothing to do with pirates," Ashley announced, as if the thought was embarrassing to him. "But it's a very practical hiding place. Nobody will come here for sure."

He walked about ten metres into the cave, just as far as the dim daylight could reach. He held himself to the rock face on the left and bent over a large stone. "Need your help here, young man," he said.

They pulled out a flat metal box with two handles.

"For two years, I have kept the loot here," said Ashley. "This now only has the latest—about \$60,000 from the California Life Insurance safe. All here."

"And this time you want to make an exception?" Jupe asked, but Ashley was silent.

They lifted the box and carried it back to the boat.

"I'm afraid," said Silver Hair, "there's hardly anything else left for me."

"Just a moment," Jupiter said quickly, before Ashley started again. "What role does the man who always wears a camel-hair coat play? Was he the burglar?"

"Yes. His accomplice is a certain Phil Jordan—an uneducated lout."

Heavens, Jupe thought, and suddenly his bruises hurt him again.

"... But an expert. And there was Jerry Hamilton—a poor devil from Ventura. Together, they were an excellent team. No mistake in eight years. Clean, reliable work. Fascinating."

There was admiration on Ashley's face. Jupe remembered a sentence from a book Lys had recently given him. It was said that types of artists differ from normal people in that, despite their tendency towards chaos and playfulness, they crave for order and perfection.

Ashley started the engine. Two minutes later they landed right below the house in the bay. Jupiter had a dull feeling in his stomach. There was no trace of Bob and Pete anywhere. He again helped Silver Hair to pull the boat ashore and secure it to a rock.

Ashley hesitated for a moment to take the loot with him. But then he left it lying there and made quick steps towards the house. Jupiter had trouble following him again.

"I don't know," Jupiter pointed out, "if we still have a chance to talk in there."

"You already know more than enough, young man."

"So now your brother has come back," Jupiter didn't let up, "and wants to take over the company. He found out about the break-ins and wants to blackmail you with them."

Silver Hair just nodded. They had reached the stone staircase that led around the house. Ashley unlocked the front door. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted, although he cannot imagine what awaits him there, Jupiter thought.

In the living room, Bob and Pete sat on the sofa. Their hands were tied behind their backs. The camel-hair man and Burt Ashley sat in the wicker chairs. The interrogation attempts had so far remained fruitless. It was interrupted when Silver Hair and Jupe suddenly entered. The captors turned and stared at the two comers with open mouths.

"How did you get here?" stuttered Burt.



"I have a key. This is my house," his brother stated dryly. "Hello, Burt."

He forgot to return the greeting.

William Ashley turned to his employee. "May I ask, Mr Pecker, what are you doing here?" Finally, The Three Investigators found out that the camel-hair man also has a name. "I don't remember inviting you here. With my brother, I could still see a certain kinship justification to invade my house."

The man is simply class, it went through Jupiter's head.

"... As hard as that strikes me," Ashley sarcastically added. He went to the window and turned his back on the others.

"I'll tell you what I want here," Pecker burst out. "I'm tired of doing the dirty work for you. I've been risking my freedom for eight years—for you and your whims."

"I paid you," Ashley said.

"I know that," Pecker shouted. "But heaven knows it could have been more. And you didn't move me up in the company either."

Ashley turned around. He looked sharply at his brother. "That would have been different with you, wouldn't it?"

Obviously, Silver Hair did appreciate Mr Pecker's services. But he also seemed to have a pretty clear idea of his limitations. Bob and Pete were still tied up on the sofa. The camel-hair man and Burt Ashley alias Arthur Hayles remained glued to their wicker chairs. And the master of the house behaved like a scientist looking at some particularly exotic insects under his magnifying glass.

"Mr Pecker is here to take the spoils of the last burglary." Pete thought the time was right to intervene. Somehow things had to move forward. And his and Bob's position wasn't that comfortable.

Jupiter finally set himself in motion to untie the two. Bob slipped forward and tried to get up.

"Stop! Nobody moves!" Burt Ashley had jumped up and held Browning in his hand again. He retreated to the far corner of the living room to see everything. The vein of rage swelled on his forehead. If it hadn't been for that, Jupiter would have ignored him and his gun.

"What are you doing, Burt?" Silver Hair stood there and put his hands in his trouser pockets. It sounded reluctant and at the same time bored. "That's how you were when you were a kid. Always wanting things at the expense of others." William Ashley was looking for the right words for his brother. "You're a freeloader," he said.

"Shut up!" Burt Ashley screamed. He looked dangerous, standing there at the corner with his gun.

"The loot from the last burglary is in my motorboat on the beach," said the host. "If you think I haven't paid you well enough, Mr Pecker, you should get it and then get out of here. After all, it's \$60,000."

The camel-hair man rose. "Nobody leaves here without my permission," Burt shouted. Pecker let himself fall back into the armchair again. The next moment, Burt Ashley changed his mind again. He obviously didn't want to play the game alone against everyone. "Come on, man, go."

Jupiter wondered how the guy made money in Europe with so much lack of restraint and confusion.

Pecker went to the door. When he reached it and opened it, he stopped dead in his tracks. Then he took a few steps back to make room for Stella Ashley.

"A family reunion," Bob said cheekily.

In a flash she grasped the situation. “Stop it, Uncle Burt!” She wore a white dress and a matching shoulder bag and looked even more impressive than yesterday. Apparently, she had a distinct talent for showing up at the right moment. And like her father, she seemed to know exactly what she wanted.

“I’ll come to you now, and you’ll give me your gun.” Then she pointed to her bag. “I got a gun in there too. To stop me, you’d have to shoot me.”

Jupe was thrilled. Stella Ashley marched towards her uncle and took his Browning from his hand. Then she went to Bob and Pete and loosened their shackles. The two thanked her with the most gallant bow they were capable of after the last two uncomfortable hours.

Stella turned to her father. He wistfully stroked her hair.

Jupe remembered his duties as the leader of The Three Investigators. He went to the phone, picked up the handset and looked sharply at the camel-hair man who was standing indecisively in the hallway. “I guess it’s inevitable to call the police now,” said Jupiter Jones. “And I suggest we all stay in the house until they get there.”

## 18. The Secret of the Yellow Painting

It was an unfortunate coincidence that Aunt Mathilda ran into them when they unloaded the yellow painting from Bob's Beetle. Silver Hair was a strange person and had given the painting to them before the police came to the house in the bay to pick him, his brother and the camel-hair man up. "I insist. It's a souvenir," he had said. Now the question was where they'd put it. Aunt Mathilda saw the work of art and put her arms on her hips again. Obviously, her living room was out of question.

"It's all right, Aunt Mathilda," Jupe said. "We'll find a place somewhere." For the time being, they dragged the artwork that had started it all back into the storeroom.

Pete had a wonderful idea. His grandmother, a sprightly lady of nearly eighty years old, loved such curios and would probably be delighted with such a gift.

Aunt Mathilda didn't let the sight of the artwork spoil her good mood after all. "You men all have miserable tastes. Nevertheless, you are welcome for a feast tonight."

They thanked her politely without saying that they had already been invited by Uncle Titus. It was a matter of celebrating the conclusion of this exciting case.

There was a surprise waiting for them in the dining room. The table was prepared for nine people. Bob poked Jupe in the side. "Your aunt couldn't have invited Phil Jordan and his gang?" Jupe painfully made a face.

The doorbell rang, and Lys, Kelly and Elizabeth marched in. They greeted Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus and said that a feast with Mrs Jones was obviously the only way to see the busy investigators again.

"We were both only at the movies a few days ago," Jupiter quietly defended himself, aiming at Lys. Anyway, he hadn't forgotten her hair on his jacket yet.

A moment later, the bell rang again, Uncle Titus opened the door and Stella Ashley appeared.

"Here is a young lady," said Uncle Titus solemnly, "of whom Jupiter told me so much that I absolutely wanted to get to know her better. And when I called her, she was eager to get to know The Three Investigators better."

The boys were a little embarrassed, and Lys found that Jupiter stood particularly well. Aunt Mathilda, who actually had the very best intentions, raised an eyebrow. She found Titus's demonstrative interest in the attractive Stella Ashley somewhat inappropriate.

Jupiter gave her aunt a friendly nudge, and then she herself had to smile at her touch of jealousy after so many—almost always—happy years of marriage.

They had a majestic feast—and drank and talked about this and that and of course, about the case.

Stella said that her father had been released on a high bail and was looking forward to his trial with the hope of a lenient sentence. Pecker, however, was behind bars. Burt Ashley, too, had to spend several shocking days in prison before his lawyers got him out. After all, he had the raid and several robberies on his hands.

Phil Jordan and Larry, according to Chief Reynolds, had been arrested the next day. There were also other charges against them. Jupiter had already decided not to pay them back for the nocturnal maltreatment.

Al Hamilton was lucky, very lucky. “We asked Mr Ashley whether he could do something for him,” Pete told the round table. “And now he’s got a job at the company’s spare parts store.”

“And his father?” Kelly asked.

Bob shrugged. “Probably going to jail, that’s one reason Mr Ashley felt responsible for Al.”

Uncle Titus glanced at Aunt Mathilda and gathered all his courage. “What was the yellow painting really about?” he asked and twirled his moustache.

“Nothing,” Jupiter said.

Uncle Titus realized that did not understand the world anymore.

“It’s actually kind of complicated,” began his nephew. “When his brother came back from Europe and wanted to take the company away from him, Stella’s father soon noticed Pecker’s attitude slowing changing. But it was nothing more than a suspicion. To find out how far Pecker would go, Mr Ashley misled the camel-hair man into believing that the painting contained valuable secrets.”

“What kind of secrets?” Aunt Mathilda cried, shaking her head.

“Pecker was made to believe that the painting contained evidence of the burglaries and clues to the loot’s hiding place. That was what the scribbles behind the canvas was for. Actually they were meaningless. Then Mr Ashley faked the theft of the painting, but actually he secretly gave it to an auctioneer in Santa Paula. He wanted to see what Pecker would do—whether he would recover the painting to conceal the evidence or to get the clues to the loot.

“Pecker and old Hamilton always delivered the loot to Ashley without knowing what he did with them. That too has increasingly upset the camel-hair man against his boss.” The Jones couple and the girls listened attentively.

Jupiter enjoyed this attention and took a big sip of tea before he continued. “Burt Ashley was brutal. When he learned of the painting’s secret, he only pursued it for the clues to the loot—as he wasn’t involved in the burglaries. At that time, he wasn’t in collaboration with Pecker. He mobilized Phil Jordan’s troops and Alex Hamilton to get the painting. This led to the night raids at our salvage yard.

“However, Pecker got the painting first by buying it from us. Actually, he never knew exactly what he wanted. Perhaps it was to show loyalty to William Ashley by bringing the supposedly stolen painting back to his boss. When Mr Ashley ignored him, he was angry and decided to work with Burt Ashley for the loot. By that time, William Ashley had taken the painting away and hid it in the basement of his house by the bay. That was when Burt Ashley and Pecker decided to search the house either for the painting or the loot. Well, we all know what happened after that.”

“There’s a lot more food left here. Do you want more, Titus?” Aunt Mathilda gave her brightest smile. In addition to her husband, there were other interested parties, including Jupiter. He leaned back, took a sip of orange juice this time and looked at the food on his plate. Tomorrow, he decided, tomorrow’s the day. He would start with five rounds a day around the salvage yard—secretly. And then he would soon challenge Pete and Bob to an endurance race.

Uncle Titus rose for a little speech. “If I’d known what those few scratches on the storeroom door would do...” he said and paused. “Thank you. I’m sorry that I’ve put you three in great danger—when I think of your boat ride or what Burt Ashley could have done to you. And of course, the insidious attack on Juve.”

His nephew put his knife and fork aside and rolled up his sleeves silently. The bruises were still shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow. The girls and Stella Ashley gave him

pitiful looks.

“Aunt Mathilda and I have thought about how we can return the favour,” Uncle Titus concluded. “And we’ve already found something. You may guess what.”

With loads of laughter all round, The Three Investigators made outlandish guesses from used bicycles to a Europe trip, everything and anything that came to their minds. Until Aunt Mathilda got up and announced they were going to do house cleaning in the storeroom. “And that,” she said firmly, “is urgently needed.”